

THE  
COMIC  
IMAGINATION  
IN  
AMERICAN  
LITERATURE

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*Edited by*  
Louis D. Rubin, Jr.

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# Preface

The thirty-two papers in this book, all having to do with the comic imagination in American literature, were originally prepared for a Forum series on that topic to be broadcast to overseas audiences over the Voice of America. In 1971 I was approached by the United States Information Agency and asked to serve as coordinator for such a series. I was given the general theme; the choice of individual topics within that framework, and of those persons who would be asked to handle them, was my own, the only stipulation being that I was expected to provide an introductory and a concluding paper and to give at least one of the others. The broadcast format dictated that the papers were to be prepared so that each could be delivered in twenty-seven minutes, though no limitation of length was placed on the published version. The contributors were also given the option of either delivering the papers they had written as talks, or being interviewed on the topics discussed in the papers. As in previous such Forum series, the Voice of America planned to publish the papers for overseas distribution, and I was encouraged to arrange for U.S. publication as I saw fit. Accordingly, the Rutgers University Press was approached, and agreed to undertake book publication.

As should be obvious, given the nature of the occasion for their preparation, the papers that follow are introductory. They are designed to acquaint an audience of listeners, presumably without much detailed knowledge of American literature, with some of the themes, high points, and principal practitioners of comedy in American literature. The term "comic imagination" was construed along broader lines than might ordinarily be expected. Of course the out-and-out humorists were to be included—one could hardly do better than to secure James M. Cox to discuss Mark Twain, Gerald Weales for the *New Yorker* writers, and so on. But of at least equal importance in any portrayal of the comic imagination in American

novelist such as William Faulkner, for example, though perhaps best known for his great tragedies, has also written some of the finest comedy in the English language. Not only that, but as Robert D. Jacobs shows, there is, mixed in with the tragedy in such novels as *Light in August*, much that is calculated to draw laughter. And there are other writers whose work, as George Core points out about Henry James, while not the straight, side-splitting comedy of a Clemens or a Faulkner, is nonetheless deeply infused with the comic spirit. And even such "morbid" and "gloomy" writers as Nathaniel Hawthorne and Edgar Allan Poe are not without the important comic overtones which Hennig Cohen explores in his paper.

Indeed, one could go on from there, and demonstrate that there is scarcely an important American writer who does not at one time, or another see the problem before him comically. Surely Jake Barnes on Robert Cohn's predilection for *The Purple Land* in Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises* is amusing, and also Little Topsy in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, and the amatory tactics of the salesman Drouet in Dreiser's *Sister Carrie*, and the spectacle of Tom Buchanan trying to think about the future of the Nordic race in Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, and so on. But one would have to draw the line somewhere, if the Voice of America were not to devote its Forum to comedy in American literature for years to come.

In any event, I set out to make up my list, and to select contributors accordingly. The objective was to sketch out the modes of American comedy, ranging from the journalistic and the subliterate on through the reaches of artistic achievement, to cover some of the leading practitioners of comedy, and to try to suggest some of the relationships between the comic writings of Americans and the problems—literary, philosophical, social, political, economic—of the society whose life they sought to interpret. Beyond what was possible through the selection of topics and contributors, I did not presume to instruct my colleagues as to precisely what those problems and those relationships were, since I did not pretend to have more than a very general notion about the matter myself. At first it was thought that the cause of unity of focus in these papers might be advanced by preparation of an introductory essay

which could be distributed to all the participants in advance. But after I surveyed what was available in the line of commentary and theoretical formulation about American comedy, beyond Walter Blair's introduction to his anthology *Native American Humor*, I came to the swift conclusion that so little had been written on the subject (the best such book, Constance Rourke's *American Humor*, was forty years old!) that it would be both premature and presumptuous to attempt to formulate any such thematic preface and then expect the contributors to follow it. Thus the two essays that introduce and conclude this collection represent my own independent notion of what is involved, and do not in any sense serve as a blueprint for the thirty papers appearing between them in the Table of Contents. Perhaps from these papers a future scholar may be able to find the suggestions from which to develop a more definitive and all-inclusive theory of American literary comedy than is set forth here.

If one surveys the various papers that make up this volume, one notes at once that not all the contributors viewed their tasks in the same way. Some of the papers concentrate on presenting the work discussed to an audience largely unfamiliar with it, without too much interpretation, while others seek to use the work to get at the culture from which it came. Perhaps this is just as well; for this volume constitutes in effect the first full-scale symposium ever attempted on the length and breadth of the American comic imagination, and under such circumstances a variety of approaches is all to the good. The industry and prodigality of modern-day American literary scholarship being what they are, it may seem strange that so little writing has been done about so vast a subject, but such would appear to be the case. Perhaps the very tentative nature of this kind of volume, intended not so much for other American scholars as for an overseas listening audience, may serve to whet the appetites of American scholars for more and better study of the subject; if so, I, the contributors, and the publisher will be gratified.

All the same, despite the introductory function imposed upon the contributors, there are some distinguished papers here, which go deeply and imaginatively into their subjects, and are not soon

to be superseded. One doubts, for example, that the basic impulse behind much nineteenth-century humor has anywhere been more keenly searched out than within the brief compass of James Cox's study of the Southwestern humorists, or that a better insight into what Ring Lardner and Sinclair Lewis were about has been provided than in C. Hugh Holman's essay, or that the relationship of the contemporary Jewish novelists to American tradition on the one hand and European Jewish humor on the other has been set forth with more authority than Allen Guttman manages in his paper. Or that—but one must desist, or else appear to be playing favorites among a host of good papers.

In a sense, writing *about* humor and humorists is perforce an awkward business. For after all, the humor is *funny*; it is aimed at the risibilities, designed to make the reader laugh, not think. So when one sets out to think about it and to subject it to analysis, there is always the lurking suspicion that, in so doing, one is not only responding improperly, but behaving just a trifle ridiculously. One lays oneself wide open for the critic to ridicule all this solemn pontificating about funny writing. But what, after all, can one do about that? Quote generously from the humor, of course; but even that scarcely does justice to it: it was not meant to be excerpted and quoted but read in full. Now of course in point of strict logic one ought not to feel that way. One does not require the dentist to have the toothache, and the political analyst to run for office and accept free vacations in Florida, in order that they may ply their trades. Still, in a project such as this one, the unease is present, and it might just as well be admitted. In any event, I would declare that, given the limitations of the format, the contributors have all in all labored very sturdily indeed, and to good effect, and that it is to editorial incapacity rather than to authorial inadequacy that most of the defects herein deserve to be ascribed.

Speaking of which, the editor is all too conscious of certain omissions. Somehow, in the planning and assigning of thirty-odd essays on American comedy, provision was not made for presentation of the extravagances of Thomas Wolfe's Gant family, and that is most unfortunate. The local color writers would appear to have been shortchanged: very little Bret Harte or George W.

Cable. There should have been a place for William Saroyan, and for Clarence Day, and for a few of those creatures of John Steinbeck. And isn't there much humor in Walt Whitman, and considerably more in Emily Dickinson? Where is J. D. Salinger? Where is John Crowe Ransom? Where indeed? Can one view Mr. Apeneck Sweeney with entire gravity, or even J. Alfred Prufrock? And so on. The editor is to blame for this; he freely admits it, but he is to blame nonetheless.

As for imbalance, well, that is another matter. One might, for example, question the decision to devote an entire essay, even so good a one as Jay Martin's, to Ambrose Bierce, while a James Thurber or an E. B. White is discussed, though very well indeed, only to the extent of a few paragraphs. To this I would reply that within so limited a purview, I had to group and combine where I could, and that whereas Thurber and White (and Benchley and Perelman and others) might with some appropriateness be considered together as exemplary of the best performance of a single, very influential magazine, there was no way to combine a Bierce with anybody or anything else. Given sixty-four essays instead of thirty-two I could have cut down on such imbalance, though even then hardly to the satisfaction of everyone. But with only thirty-two places to be filled, and so much with which to fill them, it was necessary to use sleight of hand, and that is what I did.

The idea for this Forum on the comic imagination in American literature was first conceived by Max Grossman, then editor of the Voice of America Forum series. Midway through the proceedings Mr. Grossman retired, and was succeeded by Richard Gordon. It would be impossible for the coordinator of such a venture as this to have received greater support and understanding than that provided by both these gentlemen, and I am grateful. Karin Gleiter, a graduate student at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and business manager of the *Southern Literary Journal*, provided the steadfast secretarial stability that any such catch-as-catch-can editorial venture needs. The Department of English of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, in particular its then-chairman James R. Gaskin, offered ample help and encouragement.

And it was good to be part of an American Literature staff of such strength up and down the line that when at the last minute certain papers turned up undelivered, one had only to turn to one's own departmental colleagues for fill-ins. Finally, a number of the broadcast recordings of these papers were done here in Chapel Hill, where I enjoyed the full cooperation of the University's Department of Radio, Television, and Motion Pictures.

Louis D. Rubin, Jr.  
University of North Carolina  
at Chapel Hill

Chapel Hill, North Carolina  
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# Introduction:

## "The Great American Joke"

Louis D. Rubin, Jr.

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He took a pen and some paper. "Now—name of the elephant?"

"Hassan Ben Ali Selim Abdallah Mohammed Moise Alhammal Jamsetjeebhoy Dhuleep Sultan Ebu Bhudpoor."

"Very well. Given name?"

"Jumbo."

Mark Twain, *The Stolen White Elephant*

The American literary imagination has from its earliest days been at least as much comic in nature as tragic. Perhaps this is only as might be expected; for while the national experience has involved sadness, disappointment, failure and even despair, it has also involved much joy, hopefulness, accomplishment. The tragic mode, therefore, could not of itself comprehend the full experience of the American people. From the moment that the colonists at Jamestown were assailed by the arrows of hostile Indians, and one Mr. Wynckfield "had one shott cleane through his bearde, yet scaped hurte," there has been too much to smile at. The type of society that has evolved in the northern portion of the western hemisphere bears no notable resemblance either to Eden or to Utopia, of course. From the start it has been inhabited by human beings who have remained most human and therefore most fallible. Even so, if one views American history as a whole it would be very difficult to pronounce it a tragedy, or to declare that the society of man would have been better off if it had never taken place (though Mark Twain once suggested as much).

Yet for all that, it is remarkable how comparatively little attention has been paid to American humor, and to the comic imagination in general, by those who have chronicled and interpreted American literature. Thalia, the muse of comedy, has always been something of a wallflower in critical circles, and the attention has gone principally to Melpomene and her more glamorous celebrants of tragedy. In large part, of course, this is because in the hierarchy of letters comedy has always occupied a position below and inferior to tragedy. We have tended to equate gravity with importance. The highest accolade we give to a humorist is when we say that even so he is a "serious" writer—which is to say that although he makes us laugh, his ultimate objective is to say something more about the human condition than merely that it is amusing. This implies that comedy is "un-serious"—we thus play a verbal trick, for we use "serious" to mean both "important" and "without humor," when the truth is that there is no reason at all why something cannot be at once very important and very comic.

In any event, more time and effort have been invested in attempting to study and to understand American tragedy than American comedy, and humorous writing is customarily relegated to a subordinate role. In so doing, we have been guilty of neglecting a valuable insight into the understanding of American society. For not only have many American writers been comic writers, but the very nature of comedy would seem to make it particularly useful in studying life in the United States. When Mark Twain speaks of "the calm confidence of a Christian holding four aces," he makes a joke and notes a human incongruity of interest to historians of American Protestantism. The essence of comedy is incongruity, the perception of the ridiculous. The seventeenth-century English critic Dennis's remark, that "the design of Comedy is to amend the follies of Mankind, by exposing them," points to the value of humor in searching out the shortcomings and the liabilities of society. In a democracy, the capacity for self-criticism would seem to be an essential function of the body politic, and surely this has been one of the chief tasks of the American writer. Thus H. L. Mencken, himself a newspaperman, rebukes the American press. The brain of the average journalist, he reports, "is a mass of trivialities and puerilities; to recite it would be to make even a barber beg

for mercy." From colonial times onward, we have spent a great deal of time and effort criticizing ourselves, pointing out our shortcomings, exploring the incongruities and the contradictions within American society. As the novelist and poet Robert Penn Warren put it, "America was based on a big promise—a great big one: the Declaration of Independence. When you have to live with that in the house, that's quite a problem—particularly when you've got to make money and get ahead, open world markets, do all the things you have to, raise your children, and so forth. America is stuck with its self-definition put on paper in 1776, and that was just like putting a burr under the metaphysical saddle of America—you see, that saddle's going to jump now and then and it pricks." Literature has been one of the important ways whereby the American people have registered their discomfort at those pricks, and repeatedly the discomfort has been expressed in the form of humor—often enough through just such a homely metaphor as Warren used. For if we look at Warren's remark, what we will notice is that it makes use of a central motif of American humor—the contrast, the incongruity between the ideal and the real, in which a common, vernacular metaphor is used to put a somewhat abstract statement involving values—self-definition, metaphysical—into a homely context. The statement, in other words, makes its point through working an incongruity between two modes of language—the formal, literary language of traditional culture and learning, and the informal, vernacular language of everyday life.

This verbal incongruity lies at the heart of American experience. It is emblematic of the nature and the problem of democracy. On the one hand there are the ideals of freedom, equality, self-government, the conviction that ordinary people can evince the wisdom to vote wisely, and demonstrate the capacity for understanding and cherishing the highest human values through embodying them in their political and social institutions. On the other hand there is the *Congressional Record*—the daily exemplary reality of the fact that the individual citizens of a democracy are indeed ordinary people, who speak, think and act in ordinary terms, with a suspicion of abstract ideas and values. Thus Senator Simon Cameron of Pennsylvania, after his Committee on Foreign Relations had rejected the nomination of Richard Henry Dana as U.S. Ambassador to

England, could exult because his country would not be represented at the Court of St. James's by "another of those damned literary fellows." The problem of democracy and culture is one of how, in short, a democracy can reach down to include all its citizens in its decision-making, without at the same time cheapening and vulgarizing its highest social, cultural and ethical ideals. Who, that is, will, in a democracy, commission the Esterhazy quartets? Confronting this problem, Thomas Jefferson called for an *aristoi*, an aristocracy of intellect. He believed that through public education the civilized values of truth, knowledge and culture that he cherished would be embodied and safeguarded in the democratic process so that leadership could be produced which would not be demagogic and debasing. His good friend John Adams was skeptical of this ever coming to pass, and Adams's great-grandson, Henry Adams, lived to chronicle and deplore a time when the workings of political and economic democracy made heroes of the vulgar and the greedy, and had no place in the spectrum of power, he thought, for an Adams who by virtue of inbred inheritance still believed in the disinterested morality, as he saw it, of the Founding Fathers. What Henry Adams could not fathom was why the public could nominate for the presidency of the United States a Ulysses Grant, a James A. Garfield, a James G. Blaine, and then vote for him. He could only conclude that "the moral law had expired—like the Constitution." "The progress of evolution from President Washington to President Grant," he concluded, "was alone evidence enough to upset Darwin."

The problem has been part of American experience from the start, and it is at least as crucial today as in the past. Though it is by no means purely or uniquely American, it is nevertheless distinctively so, and if we look at American literary history we will quickly recognize that the writers have been dealing with it all along the way. Herman Melville's famous invocation to the muses in *Moby-Dick* faces it squarely:

If, then, to meanest mariners, and renegades and castaways, I shall hereafter ascribe high qualities, though dark; weave round them tragic graces; if even the most mournful, perchance the most abased, among them all, shall at times lift himself to the exalted mounts; if I shall spread a rainbow over

his disastrous set of sun, then against all mortal spirits bear me out in it, thou just Spirit of Equality, which hast spread one royal mantle of humanity over all my kind! Bear me out in it, thou great democratic God' . . .

Melville wanted to create a tragedy along metaphysical lines, and yet he wanted to write about the Nantucket whaling fleet; his problem was how to render the everyday experience of life aboard a whaling vessel while creating a tragic protagonist, one who, in Aristotle's classic formula, could arouse pity and terror through his fall from eminence. Obviously such a protagonist, Aristotle declared, "must be one who is highly renowned and prosperous,—a personage like Oedipus, Thyestes, or other illustrious men of such families." How to give a whaling captain such heroic stature? Melville's solution was partly one of language. He separated the two elements. He used a literary, highly poetic, Shakespearean diction to chronicle Ahab, and a much more vernacular, colloquial diction to report on the activities of the crew. He made the language distance between tragic captain and motley crew serve his ultimate meaning.

In so doing, however, Melville was forced to distort and impoverish the experience of a whaling captain. He could not make (nor did he wish to make) Captain Ahab into a "typical" Nantucket whaling skipper. He had to leave out a great deal of what an ordinary whaling captain does and says and thinks. The Captain of the *Pequod* must not cuss out the cabin boy in approved Nantucket style. To achieve the magnificent tragedy of Ahab against the universe, Melville was forced to sacrifice much of what a whaling captain was as a whaling captain. The "realism" of *Moby-Dick* does not extend to the Captain of the *Pequod*. No one would lament the loss; *Moby-Dick* is worth whatever it cost to make it possible. But all the same, the problem remains. How does the writer evoke the civilized values—of language, religion, philosophy, culture in general—that have traditionally been used to give order and delineate meaning in society, while at the same time remaining faithful to the everyday texture of "low life" experience? How may a whaling captain grapple with the eternal verities and yet be shown doing it in the terms in which such things would confront a whaling captain, and in a mode of language that can reproduce his experi-

ence *as* a whaling captain? How many Nantucket whaling skip-pers, upon confronting their prey, would be heard declaring "Aye, breach your last to the sun, Moby Dick . . . thy hour and thy harpoon are at hand"? How to make a whaling captain into a tragic hero, in other words, without using as model the literary image of a Shakespearean tragedy? This has been the dilemma of the American writer from colonial times onward.

Henry James, in a famous passage about Nathaniel Hawthorne, expressed the cultural problem quite (I will not say succinctly, since that is no word for the style of even the early Henry James) appropriately. Taking his cue from something that Hawthorne himself wrote, James declared that

one might enumerate the forms of high civilization, as it exists in other countries, which are absent from the texture of American life, until it should be a wonder to know what was left. No State, in the European sense of the word, and indeed barely a specific national name. No sovereign, no court, no personal loyalty, no aristocracy, no church, no clergy, no army, no diplomatic service, no country gentlemen, no palaces, no castles, nor manors, nor old country-houses, nor parsonages, not thatched cottages nor ivied ruins, no cathedrals, nor abbeys, nor little Norman churches; no great Universities nor public schools—no Oxford, nor Eton, nor Harrow, no literature, no novels, no museums, no pictures, no political society, no sporting class—no Epsom nor Ascot! Some such list as that might be drawn up of the absent things in American life—especially in the American life of forty years ago, the effect of which, upon an English or a French imagination, would probably as a general thing be appalling.

But James does not stop there. "The American knows that a good deal remains," he continues; "what it is that remains—that is his secret, his joke, as one may say. It would be cruel, in this terrible denudation, to deny him the consolation of his national gift, that 'American humor' of which of late years we have heard so much." James's words are appropriately chosen, for so much of American literature has focused upon just that national "joke"—by which I take him to mean the fact that in a popular democracy the customary and characteristic institutions that have traditionally embodied cultural, social and ethical values are missing from the scene, and yet the values themselves, and the attitudes that derive from and serve to maintain them, remain very much part of the national ex-

perience. This is what Robert Penn Warren meant by the "burr under the metaphysical saddle of America," which pricks whenever the saddle jumps. Out of the incongruity between mundane circumstance and heroic ideal, material fact and spiritual hunger, democratic, middle-class society and desire for cultural definition, theory of equality and fact of social and economic inequality, the Declaration of Independence and the Mann Act, the Gettysburg Address and the Gross National Product, the Battle Hymn of the Republic and the Union Trust Company, the Horatio Alger ideal and the New York Social Register—between what men would be and must be, as acted out in American experience, has come much pathos, no small amount of tragedy, and also a great deal of humor. Both the pathos and the humor have been present from the start, and the writers have been busy pointing them out. This, then, has been what has been called "the great American joke," which comedy has explored and imaged.

One of the more amusing sketches in Joseph Glover Baldwin's *The Flush Times of Alabama and Mississippi* (1853) is that entitled "Simon Suggs, Jr., Esq: A Legal Biography." Baldwin took his character's name from that given to the old scoundrel in Johnson Jones Hooper's Simon Suggs stories. Like his father, Suggs, Jr., is semiliterate and a complete rogue. The sketch opens with some correspondence between Suggs, Jr., and the promoters of a New York biographical magazine, who write to inform him that he has been honored by having been chosen to have his biographical sketch appear in public print, and asking him to furnish biographical details and a suitable daguerreotype. The letter to Suggs, Jr., is couched in the most formal and flowery of terms, but its message is in effect a suggestion that by having his biography appear in the magazine suitably worded, Suggs, Jr., will perhaps be chosen to be a judge some day. To this elaborately worded invitation—"We know from experience, that the characteristic diffidence of the profession, in many instances, shrinks from the seeming, though falsely seeming, indelicacy of an egotistical parade of one's own talents and accomplishments . . ."—Suggs, Jr., responds with misspelled alacrity: "I'm obleeged to you for your perlite say so, and so forth. I got a friend to rite it—my own ritin being mostly perfeshunal. He done it—but he rites such a cussed bad hand I cant

rede it: I reckon its all kerrect tho'." He doesn't have a daguerreotype available, but the engraving of his famous father appearing in Hooper's *Some Adventures of Simon Suggs* will do for him if retouched to make him look a bit younger. He then receives another letter from the publisher, thanking him for his sketch, "the description of a lawyer distinguished in the out-door labors of his profession, and directing great energies to the preparation of proof." In a postscript, however, the editor informs Suggs, Jr., that "our delicacy caused us to omit . . . to mention what we suppose was generally understood, viz., the fact that the cost to us of preparing engravings &c. &c., for the sketches or memoirs, is one hundred and fifty dollars, which sum it is expected, of course, the gentleman who is perpetuated in our work, will forward to us before the insertion of his biography. . . ."

Suggs, Jr., now realizes what is going on, and he writes, "*Dear Mr. Editor*—In your p.s. which seems to be the creem of your correspondents you say I can't get in your book without paying one hundred and fifty dollars—pretty tall entrants fee!" He tells them "I believe I will pass. I'll enter a nolly prossy q. O-n-e-h-u-n-d-r-e-d-dollars and fifty better! Je-whellikens." He has begun "to see the pint of many things which was very vague and ondefinit before." And so on.

Following this exchange of correspondence, we then get the text of the biographical sketch which was prepared by Simon Suggs, Jr.'s friend for inclusion in the magazine. It is cast in the elegiac, flowery tone of such self-adulatory biographical sketches, and it makes the most of a very checkered career, putting the kindest construction possible on the events of that career. What is described is the story of various slick dealings by a consummate rogue and trickster, involving much swindling, knavery, and dishonesty, and couched throughout in the most formal and literary of tones. The humor consists of the self-important pomposity of the literary method of narration as it contrasts with the very undignified vernacular antics being described. To wit:

Col. Suggs also extricated a client and his sureties from a forfeited recognizance, by having the defaulting defendant's obituary notice somewhat prematurely inserted in the newspapers; the solicitor, seeing which, dis-



continued proceedings; for which service, the deceased, immediately after the adjournment of court, returned to the officer his particular acknowledgements. . .

The sketch concludes with Simon Suggs, Jr., in Washington attempting to settle claims on behalf of the Choctaw Indians, and with the suggestion that "may the Indians live to get their dividends of the arrears paid to their agent."

Now the humor of this sketch, like that of most of the writings of the humorists of the old nineteenth-century Southern frontier, comes out of the clash of language modes. Baldwin is perhaps the most extreme of all of them in this respect. A well-educated and highly literate man, he adopts the persona of a cultivated gentleman in order to describe the wild, untutored, catch-as-catch-can doings of the old frontier regions. The tone is that of condescension, and the humor arises out of the inappropriateness of the way in which vernacular and usually crass activities are described in quite ornate and pompous language. But although the author's spokesman is a man of culture and refinement who is amused by and somewhat contemptuous of the uninhibited, semicivilized crudeness of the frontier folk, there is also an element of respect for the way that the low-life characters can get right to the point and deal directly with experience. Suggs, Jr.'s shrewdness in spotting what the invitation to submit a sketch for the magazine really involves, his failure to be taken in by the flowery language and erudite circumlocutions of the thing, are, in the context, quite admirable. Suggs, Jr., is a rogue, to be sure, as his biographical sketch admirably demonstrates, but he does not pretend to be anything other than that. The New York entrepreneur, by contrast, is every bit as dishonest. Though his magazine is supposedly designed to supply "a desideratum in American literature, namely, the commemoration and perpetuation of the names, characters, and personal and professional traits and histories of American lawyers and jurists," and though he says that Simon, Jr., has been selected for inclusion by "many of the most prominent gentlemen in public and private life, who have the honor of your acquaintance," what he is really doing is selling self-advertisements in the guise of biographical sketches. Unlike Simon, Jr., however, he pretends to be doing so "from mo-

tives purely patriotic and disinterested," in order that "through our labors, the reputation of distinguished men of the country, constituting its moral treasure, may be preserved for the admiration and direction of mankind, not for a day, but for all time." Suggs, Jr., in brief, is a crude but honest rogue, and the editor of the magazine is a civilized but hypocritical confidence man.

Here, indeed, is the elementary, basic American humorous situation—the "great American joke," and in one very obvious form. The humor arises out of the gap between the cultural ideal and the everyday fact, with the ideal shown to be somewhat hollow and hypocritical, and the fact crude and disgusting.

The so-called frontier humor was admirably constituted to image the problems of meaning and existence in a society that was very much caught up in the process of formation. In the Old Southwest—Georgia, West Florida, Alabama, Mississippi—of the 1820's, 1830's, and 1840's, virgin wilderness was almost overnight being converted into farmland, and towns and cities coming into being where the forest trails crossed. New wealth was being created, and old fortunes either vastly augmented or lost overnight. Rich and poor flocked into the new lands, and the social distinctions brought from the older society of the Eastern seaboard were very much disordered and distorted by the new circumstance. The ability to parse a Latin verb or ride to the hounds would be less than completely useful in the fashionable parlors of Tuscaloosa, Alabama, and Columbus, Mississippi, for some time to come. Society, in other words, was being reordered, and former distinctions of class and caste rearranged in accordance with the realities of wealth and power in a changed community. Since language, education, culture are always ultimately grounded in social position, the social confusion of an open frontier society is reflected in a confusion of language and cultural modes and attitudes. It will take several generations for the descendants of a Simon Suggs, Jr., to acquire the social polish and cultural sophistication that educational advantages made possible by new wealth can ultimately afford them; and the effort to chronicle the checkered career of an opportunistic rascal in the sophisticated language appropriate to a biographical sketch in an Eastern magazine provides the rich incongruity that Baldwin could draw on for purposes of humor.

The clash between the ideal and the real, between value and fact, is of course not an exclusively American motif. Cervantes rang the changes on it in *Don Quixote*, and Aristophanes before him. But a society based theoretically upon the equality of all men, yet made up of human beings very unequal in individual endowment, and containing within it many striking social, economic and racial differences, is more than ordinarily blessed with such problems in human and social definition, and the incongruities are likely to be especially observable. The very conditions of a frontier society, with its absence of settled patterns and with its opportunities for freedom and individuality, are ideally suited for this kind of humor. One finds it already in flower long before the Declaration of Independence. Consider a work such as William Byrd II's *History of the Dividing Line*. An English-educated planter, trained for the law in the Middle Temple, member of the Royal Society, one accustomed to command and to receiving the deference due a wealthy planter, goes off with a surveying party to determine the boundary line between the Virginia and the North Carolina colonies. There in the Dismal Swamp he encounters rustics who are without culture, refinement, ambition, or wealth, and who moreover do not seem to feel the lack of such commodities very much. His response is to poke fun at them, to use ridicule to rebuke the failure of the vulgar fact to approximate the cultural and social ideal. So he adopts a mode of language that through its inappropriateness to the triviality of the occasion, makes the settlers appear ludicrous: they "stand leaning with both their arms upon the cornfield fence, and *gravely consider* whether they had best go and take a small heat at the hoe . . ." [*italics mine*]. Here again is the same clash of modes that Baldwin and the Southwestern Humorists would use to chronicle the New Men in the New Territory. In both instances the fact—the ordinary man, as he is, unregenerate and uncaring—is satirized by being described in a language mode customarily reserved for more elevated subject matter. But where in Byrd the satire is all directed at the low-life objects, in Baldwin it is not so one-sided. For though Baldwin is a Virginian and a Whig and a man of education and culture, he is enough of a democratic American to admire the independence and the practicality of his low-life characters just a little, and so he does not confine his ridicule to them. He

turns the language mode, the elevated diction, back on itself. He is consciously over-elegant, overly genteel in his choice of phraseology, so that the formal diction, the language of Culture, is also being mocked. The Great American Joke thus works both ways, and the incongruity illuminates the shortcomings of both modes.

Neither Byrd's *History of the Dividing Line* nor Baldwin's *Flush Times in Alabama and Mississippi* is, strictly speaking, literature, so much as subliterate. The one is narrative history, the other humorous journalism. Neither was designed purely or primarily as full-fledged artistic statement. But the same kind of incongruity they offer, the clash of genteel and vulgar modes, has been incorporated into the comic art of many of America's best and most respected writers. A single example will suffice to illustrate. The twentieth-century novelist William Faulkner has not only written certain novels that are possibly the only genuine literary tragedy produced by an American author in this century, but he is also one of the finest comic writers in American literature. In his comic masterpiece, *The Hamlet*, Flem Snopes and a Texan bring a herd of wild Texas horses to Mississippi and offer them for sale at very low prices. They are snapped up by the inhabitants, who are then invited to claim the horses they have purchased. Before very long wild horses are being pursued all over the landscape; they jump fences, leap over people, run into houses, overturn wagons, until as nighttime comes they are scattered over miles of countryside. One hapless purchaser, felled by the stampeding Texas herd, is carried unconscious into a house by some of his friends. Afterwards they go outside:

They went out; they didn't look back. They tiptoed up the hall and crossed the veranda and descended into the moonlight. Now that they could pay attention to it, the silver air seemed to be filled with faint and sourceless sounds—shouts, thin and distant, again a brief thunder of hooves on a wooden bridge, more shouts faint and thin and earnest and clear as bells; once they even distinguished the words: "Whooley. Head him."

Once again, both language modes are at work: the heightened literary diction, drawing on the full resources of cadenced prose and metaphor, and the vivid colloquial counterthrust. The haunting, beautiful description of the pursuit over the pastoral landscape is

undercut by the broad vulgar comedy of the actual fact itself—the hoodwinked farmers vainly attempting to corral their untamable purchases. But Faulkner is not satirizing his characters, the human dignity he has given them as they go about the activities that are the plot of *The Hamlet* is such that, though they are "low-life," they are not thereby debased. Thus when, with the escape of the wild horses and their pursuit, he moves into the mode of formal literary diction and metaphor to describe what happens, the effect of incongruity does not produce satire and ridicule, so much as a delightful counterpoint of modes that plays them back and forth, against and around and along with each other. The shouting is "faint and thin and earnest and clear as bells," even as they *do* call out "Whooley. Head him." The contrast of literary language and poetic description with vernacular fact and colloquial speech is developed into as marvelously comic a scene as any in American literature. Both elements are at work, and in their juxtaposition each delineates the other. It is a masterful intensification of the same brand of humor as that of Byrd's *Dividing Line*, Baldwin's *Flush Times*, Irving's *Knickerbocker History*, Longstreet's *Georgia Scenes*, Clemens's *Connecticut Yankee*, Hemingway's *Torrents of Spring*, Barth's *Sot-Weed Factor*, and many another work of American comedy. It is the interplay of the ornamental and the elemental, the language of culture and the language of sweat, the democratic ideal and the mulishness of fallen human nature—the Great American Joke. To quote the business partner of Thomas Wolfe's Bascom Pentland in *Of Time and the River*, "the Reverend knows words the average man aint never heard. He knows words that aint even in the dictionary. Yes, sir!—an' uses them too—all the time!"



**Louis B. Wright** recently retired as director of the Folger Shakespeare Library in Washington, D.C. A native of Greenwood County, South Carolina, he has written and edited many books on Colonial American Literature, including the publication, after their rediscovery in the 1930s, of the diaries of William Byrd.

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# *Human Comedy in Early America*

*Louis B. Wright*

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The literature of colonial America is not notable for humor. The early settlers were a serious people struggling to establish themselves in a wilderness and they had little time for polite letters or for literature of sheer entertainment. Humorous writings intended merely to amuse are a product of a leisured and sophisticated society. Colonial America knew little about leisure, and such writers as flourished in this period were inspired by a sense of purpose other than entertainment. This does not mean, however, that there was no laughter and merriment. Now and then one sees a glint of humor in the writings of the day, occasionally in letters and informal communications.

From early in the history of American literature satire has been one of the commonest forms of humorous writing. Americans have enjoyed poking fun at pretentiousness, pomposity, and vainglory. They have used satire as an instrument of reform and have sometimes laughed out of existence shortcomings in society that provoked the scorn and ridicule of writers. Mark Twain, one of the greatest American writers, was a master of satire; for many generations before his time, however, American writers had been employing this instrument with comic effect. Most of the consciously humorous writing in colonial America was satirical.

Some of the humor of early colonial days was unconscious—commentary of the period that is funny to us but was deadly serious to the writers. The first American best seller was Michael Wig-

glesworth's *Day of Doom*, a grim Puritan poem describing the Last Judgment and the plight of sinners on that day. Its vivid descriptions of hell and the punishments awaiting a large proportion of the human race must have caused widespread hysteria. Yet to a later generation, lacking the theological beliefs of the Puritans, passages in this poem appear grotesquely comic, as for instance, the lines in which God judges infants who are condemned because of original sin, the sin of Adam's disobedience. In His mercy, the Almighty decrees:

I do confess yours is much less,  
though every sin's a crime.  
A crime it is, therefore in bliss  
you may not hope to dwell;  
But unto you I shall allow  
the easiest room in hell.

Such passages caused shudders of terror in seventeenth-century New England Puritans but their descendants can smile at these antique beliefs.

Although most seventeenth-century authors had important matters to relate, the comic spirit was not always absent when they sat down to write. Captain John Smith, explorer and colonizer of Virginia, described in vivid and sometimes humorous detail his own experiences and made pungent comments on associates who displeased him. In 1608 the English king, James I, sent Captain Christopher Newport to Virginia with a rich regalia for the Indian chief Powhatan, who, King James had been told, was king of the Virginia Indians. Smith, a realist in his dealings with the Indians, thought this act a piece of folly. In a treatise entitled *A Map of Virginia* (1612) Smith provided a sardonic description of the episode. Newport had instructions to clothe Powhatan in a scarlet robe of office, receive his oath of allegiance, and crown him. Smith commented on the farce: "But a foul trouble there was to make him kneel to receive the crown. He neither knowing the majesty nor meaning of a crown, nor bending of the knee, endured so many persuasions, examples, and instructions as tired them all. At last, by leaning hard on his shoulders, he a little stooped and Newport



put the crown on his head." A salute fired by Newport's gunners scared Powhatan out of his wits, but he soon recovered his calm. Smith reported, and "then, remembering himself to congratulate their kindness, he gave his old shoes and his mantle to Captain Newport." Thus ended the crowning of an Indian. Newport carried back Powhatan's old cloak to King James, and it is preserved to this day in the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford.

The sternest of the early English colonists were the Puritans of New England, who hoped to establish a religious commonwealth where they could live unspotted from the world. Yet they were not able to keep from their territory men less solemn and less dedicated than themselves. One interloper who embarrassed them with his gaiety, frivolity, and fraternization with the Indians was Thomas Morton, who came to New England in 1622 and established himself at Merry Mount (now Braintree), not far from Plymouth where the Pilgrims had made their settlement. Morton scandalized his Puritan neighbors by setting up a Maypole and celebrating May Day with singing, dancing, and drinking "good liquor." Captain Miles Standish and a detail of soldiers from Plymouth finally arrested Morton and shipped him back to England, where he wrote a satirical account of his experiences, published in 1637 with the title, *The New English Canaan*. "The setting up of this Maypole," Morton declared, "was a lamentable spectacle to the precise separatists that lived at New Plymouth. They termed it an idol, yea they called it the Calf of Horeb [Golden Calf] and stood at defiance with the place, calling it Mount Dagon." Naming Standish, who was small of stature, "Captain Shrimp," Morton described his arrest: "He takes eight persons more to him, and like the Nine Worthies of New Canaan they embark with preparation against Merry Mount where this monster of a man (as their phrase was) had his den." To prevent bloodshed Morton surrendered, and thus "Captain Shrimp and the rest of the Nine Worthies made themselves . . . masters of mine host of Merry Mount." In our time, this comic episode was made the theme of a light opera.

One of the most vigorous and original writers among the early Puritans of New England was Nathaniel Ward, a preacher, who came to Massachusetts in 1634 and settled at the village of Agawam (now Ipswich). Disturbed over what he believed to be a tendency

toward permissiveness and a willingness of some of his contemporaries to tolerate divergent religious beliefs, Ward published a satire on society in 1647 with the title *The Simple Cobbler of Agawam*. Representing himself as the cobbler, he punningly announced his intention of mending the souls of his brethren. He did this in prose that ridiculed what he considered the shortcomings of men and women. Ward leveled his criticism against tolerating any form of worship except that pleasing to his Puritan brethren. He ridiculed current fashions in manners and dress that did not comport with Puritan dignity.

Ward's vocabulary is extraordinary, and he invented words that he could apply with satirical effect. One of the liveliest passages in the book condemns the frivolity of women who yearn after the latest fashion. Ward admitted that he could approve in women

whatever Christianity or civility will allow . . . but when I hear a nupigious gentledame inquire what dress the Queen is in this week, what the nudiustertian fashion of the court, with edge to be in all haste whatever it be, I look at her as the very gizzard of a trifle, the product of a quarter of a cipher, the epitome of nothing, fitter to be kicked if she were of a kickable substance, than either honored or humored.

This is not the language of a chivalrous gallant but of an indignant Puritan bigot bent upon reforming the world according to his own notions. He can find only hard words for fashion-seeking women who have nothing in their heads, he says, "but a few squirrels' brains to help them frisk from one ill-favored fashion to another." Ward advised his readers to take seriously his condemnation of "these ape-headed pullets which invent fool-fangles merely for fashion and novelty sake."

Ward did not confine his attacks to women, for he was equally certain that men who ran after the latest fashions also endangered their souls. Long hair he thought especially deplorable. He was certain that God would prove a severe barber unless the fashion of long hair was amended, and he cited Scripture to prove the Deity's dislike of long locks. Ward's robust ridicule delighted the orthodox, who laughed at his comic and sometimes heavy-footed descriptions of the erring. Women and their fashions are among the oldest themes of priestly satire, common in all ages and

countries. Ward was merely making capital of a topic that men had always found entertaining.

Another seventeenth-century writer and satirist, George Alsop, expressed an entirely different view of life from that given by Nathaniel Ward. Unlike Ward, Alsop was anything but a Puritan and he rejoiced in the death of Oliver Cromwell and the restoration of Charles II to the English throne. In a boisterous little book entitled *A Character of the Province of Maryland* (1666), he described in prose and verse life in Maryland as he observed it. His language is vigorous but coarse, and he is not above indulging in comic obscenities. Moses Coit Tyler, historian of colonial literature, asserts that "for mirthful, grotesque, and slashing energy" only Nathaniel Ward can compare with Alsop.

Alsop had come to Maryland, apparently, under contract to serve four years as a servant to pay his fare, but this term of servitude did not bother him. He found Maryland to his liking and was glad to turn author and tell the world about his experiences. Ready to praise his own work, Alsop justified this action by declaring, "For I dwell so far from my neighbors that if I do not praise myself, nobody else will." With gusto he described the country, its inhabitants, trans-Atlantic transportation of emigrants, the Indians, and the prospects of gain from trade and agriculture in the new land. The abundance of animal life pleased him. "Herds of deer are as numerous in this province of Maryland as cuckolds can be in London," he commented; "only their horns are not so well dressed and tipped with silver." Included in the book are a few letters that Alsop wrote back to his friends.

Humor is a very perishable commodity, and not all of the comment that Alsop makes excites our laughter. What appears funny to one age may be insipid or boring to another. Nevertheless, Alsop's vigorous and comic efforts are a relief from countless pious pages written by Puritan preachers. Cotton Mather of Boston, for example, was responsible for well over four hundred titles, works for the most part of dreary piety.

Another emigrant to Maryland, Ebenezer Cook, following in Alsop's footsteps a generation later with a satirical poem entitled *The Sot-Weed Factor* (1708), a work that provided a modern novelist with a title for a burlesque work. Little is known about

Cook, but he may have been the author of a later work in verse on the overproduction of tobacco, *Sotweed Redivivus* (1730), and other minor poems.

Tobacco, called "sot-weed," provided inspiration for Cook's satire. It purports to be a narrative of an English trader's visit to Maryland. Its subtitle indicates the contents and treatment: *A Voyage to Maryland. A Satire in Which Is Described the Laws, Government, Courts, and Constitutions of the Country and Also the Buildings, Feasts, Frolics, Entertainments, and Drunken Humors of the Inhabitants of That Part of America. In Burlesque Verse.*

Cook, writing in imitation of Samuel Butler's *Hudibras*, gives a vivid, unflattering, and comic picture of Maryland. When he and his companions first land, tobacco planters swarm around them, provoking this satirical picture:

These sotweed planters crowd the shore,  
In hue as tawny as a Moor,  
Figures so strange no god designed  
To be a part of human kind;  
But wanton nature, void of rest,  
Moulded the brittle clay in jest.

At last a fancy very odd  
Took me, this was the land of Nod;  
Planted at first when vagrant Cain  
His brother had unjustly slain;

And ever since his time, the place  
Has harbored a detested race,  
Who when they could not live at home  
For refuge to these worlds did roam.

Cook finds little good to say about the Marylanders whom he meets as he travels about the country attempting to sell goods that he brought from England. Attending a session of court, he observes that it ends in a riot followed by drunken brawls and thievery. To get rid of his stock he goes to the Eastern Shore of Maryland,

To this intent, with guide before,  
I tripped it to the Eastern Shore.  
While riding near a sandy bay,  
I met a Quaker, yea and nay;  
A pious, conscientious rogue,  
As e'er wore bonnet or a brogue;  
Who neither swore nor kept his word,  
But cheated in the fear of God;  
And when his debts he would not pay,  
By Light Within he ran away.

Cook ended his satire of the Marylanders by placing a curse upon the land:

May wrath divine then lay these regions waste,  
Where no man's faithful and no woman's chaste.

Although Cook's biting satire, prudently published in London, may have angered some Marylanders if they read it, others would have laughed over his commentary. This was a robust age when men could make merry over their own and their neighbors' shortcomings. Satire also has this quality: a reader usually applies the ridicule to others whom he knows, rarely to himself.

Writers of diaries and journals often provide insights into the life of the times that are entertaining and humorous, even though the authors themselves did not intend to be comic. For example, solemn, sedate, and ponderous Samuel Sewall of Boston, chief justice of the colony, kept a diary that is of consuming interest and is often highly amusing, even though Sewall was unconscious of the entertainment that he would provide for later readers. Feeding chickens on Indian corn, he was led to speculate on his greater need for spiritual food and solemnly drew a parallel between his chickens and himself.

Left a widower in his old age, Sewall debated with himself "whether to live a single or a married life" and concluded that marriage was preferable. Having a substantial fortune himself, he decided to seek out one of several available widows who also had property. He began courting Mrs. Dorothy Denison, who encour-

aged him. As his first gift Sewall probably made a poor choice, for on June 17, 1718, he gave her "Dr. Mather's Sermons very well bound; told her we were invited to a wedding. She gave me very good curds [to eat]." A week later, however, Sewall thought of something more attractive than Cotton Mather's sermons and gave Mrs. Denison some knives and forks, which he carefully noted had cost him four shillings, six pence, and followed this with a pound of raisins and almonds.

By November 1, 1718, Sewall believed he had made a conquest and noted in his *Diary*: "I told her [Mrs. Denison] 'twas time to finish our business. Asked her what I should allow her; she not speaking, I told her I was willing to give her two [hundred] and fifty pounds per annum during her life. . . . She answered she had better keep as she was. . . . She should pay dear for dwelling in Boston." Nearly a month later, on November 28, he noted in his *Diary*: "My bowels yearn towards Mrs. Denison, but I think God directs me in his Providence to desist."

After losing Mrs. Denison because of her dissatisfaction with the proposed marriage settlement, Sewall next turned his attention to another prosperous widow, Mrs. Katherine Winthrop, and describes this courtship in detail in his *Diary*. Mrs. Winthrop, a sprightly soul, fascinated the old justice and kept him as excited as a teen-aged boy. He continued to believe that a volume of piety made a suitable gift for a lady, and on October 3, 1720, noted: "Gave her Mr. Willard's *Fountain Opened* with the little print and verses, saying I hoped if we did well read that book we should meet together hereafter if we did not now. She took the book and put it in her pocket. Took leave." Three days later, however, he observed: "I gave her a piece of Mr. Belcher's cake and gingerbread wrapped up in a clean sheet of paper." But on October 11 he sent her 2 letter and "Mr. Mayhew's *Sermons*."

But Mrs. Winthrop was not to be won easily or inexpensively. She insisted upon Sewall's buying a coach and getting a wig, both extravagances that he resisted. He had written in his *Diary* on October 12: "Told her the reason why I came every other night was lest I should drink too deep draughts of pleasure. She had talked of canary [wine]; her kisses were to me better than the best canary." Yet on October 20 romance was in difficulties. Mrs. Winthrop was arguing for a coach and he commented: "Was courteous to me but took occasion to speak pretty plainly about my keeping a coach. I said 'twould cost £100 per annum; she said 'twould cost but £40. . . . Came away somewhat late."

The upshot was that the courtship of Mrs. Winthrop ended like that of Mrs. Denison in a decisive "No" for the justice. He could not bring himself to the necessary generosity in settling a marriage portion on either of these widows. Not all his gifts of sermons, gingerbread, raisins, and almonds prevailed. On November 7, 1720, he called upon her once more but it was clear that the courtship was over. He noted: "I did not bid her draw off her glove as sometime I had done. Her dress was not as clean as sometime it had been." Two nights later, as he was going home by lantern light, he observed: "Madam Winthrop's shutters were open as I passed by." If he yearned for the widow, he did not let his loss discourage him from matrimony. By March 29, 1722, he had persuaded another widow, Mrs. Mary Gibbs, to be his third wife.

Another diary keeper contemporary with Samuel Sewall, William Byrd, second of his name, a Virginian, contributed some of the most urbane writing of the colonial period. Deliberate humor and urbanity were qualities sadly lacking in much of colonial writing, but William Byrd of Westover had both.

Byrd's father had come to Virginia sometime before 1670, acquired land, and made a fortune in the Indian trade. His son William, born in 1674, was sent to England for his education, eventually entered Middle Temple, was admitted to the bar, and became an official representative of the colony of Virginia in London on numerous occasions. In fact, Byrd spent many years in London and was as much at home in Mayfair as he was in Williamsburg. While a member of the Middle Temple he made friends with such writers as William Wycherley, William Con-

various times Byrd tried his hand at writing verse, light commentary, and delightful letters. He also kept a diary in shorthand in which he entered a daily record of his doings, sometimes revealing the sort of weakness for feminine charms that James Boswell later demonstrated during his early residence in London.

After Byrd finally settled down on his plantation at Westover on the James River he became one of the most influential figures in Virginia. When the colony decided to mark the disputed boundary between Virginia and North Carolina, Byrd was chosen to head the surveying party. With a delegation from North Carolina, they surveyed the boundary in the year 1728. This expedition led to Byrd's writing two versions of his experiences, the *History of the Dividing Line Betwixt Virginia and North Carolina Run in the Year of Our Lord 1728* and *The Secret History of the Line*. The latter version, probably written first, disguises the names of participants under pseudonyms and is more explicit than the other account about characteristics of the individuals, their shortcomings, and their activities.

Neither version was printed in Byrd's lifetime but manuscript copies circulated among his friends and provided entertainment for the readers. These accounts are perhaps the most sophisticated examples of prose written in the colonial period. Characterized by an amused attitude of the author toward humankind, the narratives are filled with humorous observations.

Byrd wrote other shorter prose narratives, the most important being *A Journey to the Land of Eden in the Year 1733* and *A Progress to the Mines in the Year 1732*. The latter work describes a visit he made to iron mines in Virginia operated by Alexander Spotswood, a former governor and rival of Byrd's but afterward his friend. The *Journey to the Land of Eden* tells of Byrd's inspection, with a party of friends, of lands that he had acquired on the North Carolina border.

The *History of the Dividing Line* has been frequently reprinted and is a delight to read. The most recent edition is contained in *The Prose Works of William Byrd of Westover*, published by the Harvard University Press in 1966.



a bivouac, for example, he notes that the men lay around the campfire "like so many Knights Templars," a figure suggested by the effigies on the tombs in the Temple Church where he had walked many times while a resident in Middle Temple. Two lost horses when found were standing "as motionless as the equestrian statue at Charing Cross."

Byrd's wit did not endear the author to those who found themselves satirized. North Carolinians have long grumbled about his report on the shiftlessness of residents on the North Carolina frontier:

Surely there is no place in the world where the inhabitants live with less labor than in North Carolina. It approaches nearer to the description of Lubberland than any other, by the great felicity of the climate, the easiness of raising provisions, and the slothfulness of the people. . . . The men for their parts, just like the Indians, impose all the work upon the poor women. They make their wives rise out of their beds early in the morning, at the same time that they lie and snore till the sun has risen one-third of his course and dispersed all the unwholesome damps. Then after stretching and yawning for half an hour, they light their pipes, and, under the protection of a cloud of smoke, venture out into the open air; though if it happen to be never so little cold, they quickly return shivering to the chimney corner. When the weather is mild, they stand leaning with both their arms upon the cornfield fence and gravely consider whether they had best go and take a small heat at the hoe but generally find reasons to put it off till another time. Thus they loiter away their lives, like Solomon's sluggard, with their arms across, and at the winding up of the year scarcely have bread to eat. To speak the truth, 'tis a thorough aversion to labor that makes people flee off to North Carolina, where plenty and a warm sun confirm them in their disposition to laziness for their whole lives.

Concerning Edenton, then the capital of North Carolina, Byrd observed that he believed it

the only metropolis in the Christian or Mahometan world where there is neither church, chapel, mosque, synagogue, or any other place of worship of any sect or religion whatsoever. . . . Sometimes the Society for Propagating the Gospel has had the charity to send over missionaries to this country; but, unfortunately, the priest has been too lewd for the people, or, which often happens, they too lewd for the priest. For these reasons these reverend gentlemen have always left their flocks as arrant heathen as they found them.

Byrd's report on the Indians of the frontier, and efforts to Christianize them, was negative. Like his brother-in-law Robert Beverley, who in his *The History and Present State of Virginia* (1705) had suggested miscegenation as the solution of the "Indian problem," Byrd also comments on this possibility as a way of civilizing the red men and populating the country, a view that he expressed somewhat sardonically:

For my part, I must be of the opinion . . . that there is but one way of converting these poor infidels and reclaiming them from barbarity, and that is charitably to intermarry with them, according to the modern policy of the Most Christian King in Canada and Louisiana. Had the English done this at the first settlement of the colony, the infidelity of the Indians had been worn out at this day with their dark complexions, and the country had swarmed with people more than it does with insects. It was certainly an unreasonable nicety that prevented their entering into so good-natured an alliance. All nations of men have the same natural dignity, and we all know that very bright talents may be lodged under a very dark skin. . . . Even their copper-colored complexion would admit of blanching, if not in the first, at the farthest in the second, generation. I may safely venture to say, the Indian women would have made altogether as honest wives for the first planters as the damsels they used to purchase from aboard the ships. 'Tis strange, therefore, that any good Christian should have refused a wholesome, straight bedfellow when he might have had so fair a portion with her as the merit of saving her soul.

At least one of Byrd's predecessors in Virginia did indeed marry an Indian. John Rolfe took as his wife Pocahontas, daughter of the chief Powhatan, and in 1614 wrote to Sir Thomas Dale to explain his own noble reasons: It was not "unbridled carnal affection," he declared, but "for the honor of our country, for the glory of God, for my own salvation, and for the converting to the true knowledge of God and Jesus Christ an unbelieving creature, namely Pocahontas." This letter must have created a certain amount of amusement, even among seventeenth-century readers who saw it.

The diary entries reveal the qualities of an eighteenth-century Virginia gentleman. One can pick passages almost at random to show these characteristics. For instance, on October 31, 1709, he wrote:

I rose at 6 o'clock and read two chapters in Hebrew and some Greek in Lucian. I said my prayers and ate milk for breakfast. About 10 o'clock we went to court. The committee met to receive proposals for the building [of] the college [William and Mary] and Mr. Tullitt undertook it for £2,000 provided he might [get] wood off the College land and all assistants from England to come at the College's risk. We sat in court till about 4 o'clock and then I rode to Green Springs to meet my wife. I found her there and had the pleasure to learn that all was well at home, thanks be to God. There was likewise Mrs. Chiswell. I ate boiled beef for supper. We danced and were merry till about 10 o'clock. I neglected to say my prayers, but had good health, good thoughts, and good humor thanks be to God Almighty.

This is a typical entry. The daily stint of Greek and Hebrew he maintained throughout his life. A cultivated gentleman in the early eighteenth century was expected to know the classical tongues. Other items in the entry call for comment. A member of the Council of State, which sat as the highest court in the land, Byrd took his judicial duties seriously. His regret over forgetting his prayers is also worth noting. An eighteenth-century gentleman, though he might fall a victim to sins of the flesh, believed in the value of decorum and religion.

Although Byrd was anything but a Puritan, he showed an appetite for sermon reading that Samuel Sewall would have approved. For instance, on Christmas night, 1710, he noted that "In the evening I read a sermon of Mr. Norris but a quarrel which I had with my wife hindered my taking much notice of it. However we were reconciled before we went to bed, but I made the first advance. I neglected to say my prayers but not to eat some milk. I had good health, good thoughts, and indifferent good humor, thank God Almighty."

Mrs. Chiswell, whom Byrd mentioned in the entry for October 31, 1709, greatly attracted him. Two days afterward, on November 2, he wrote:

In the evening I went to Dr. [Barret's] where my wife came this afternoon. Here I found Mrs. Chiswell, my sister [in-law] Custis, and other ladies. We sat and talked till about 11 o'clock and then retired to our chambers. I played r-m [cards?] with Mrs. Chiswell and kissed her on the bed till she was angry and my wife also was uneasy about it, and cried as soon as the company was gone. I neglected to say my prayers, which I should not have done, because I ought to beg pardon for the lust I had for another man's wife. However I had good health, good thoughts, and good humor, thanks be to God Almighty.

Twenty-three years later, in *A Progress to the Mines*, Byrd told of a visit to Mr. and Mrs. Chiswell and reported that she had aged sadly.

The long suppressed part of the diary for the years 1717-1721 reveals Byrd's life in London where he was the official representative of the colony of Virginia. He enjoyed the society of the gallants who gambled nightly at the Spanish Ambassador's, even though he almost invariably lost money when he himself played. A widower at the time, Byrd spent much time pursuing heiresses and other less respectable women. On one occasion he called upon a certain lady of fashion but found her away from home. He improved the hour by seducing the maid. When her ladyship returned, he seduced her. Then he added complacently, "and ate a plum cake."

Many of Byrd's letters survive, especially from this period in London. Some of them read like familiar essays and demonstrate the writer's literary skill; they are frequently lively and satirical. Like other correspondents of the eighteenth century, Byrd delighted in letter writing and was unwilling to see his efforts disappear. Otherwise there is no explanation of his saving copies of these letters and dressing them up with fictitious names for his correspondents, some from French romances, like "Cleora," "Minionet," "Sabina," "Veramour," and similar appellations.

give-and-take of sprightly conversation, he wanted to remember for future use. For instance, he noted: "When a man keeps a woman, though he can't properly be said to be married, yet he may be said to live in the suburbs of matrimony." Or, "Poets and mad men tell us there is no remedy for love, but experience that won't impose upon us is positive there are two very sure ones: marriage and a halter." One story that Byrd set down in his notebook was printed a few years ago by *Time* magazine with a Kentucky setting as a fresh joke. It follows: "Two gentlemen who pretended a wonderful nicety in distinguishing of wine went to a merchant and, tasting a particular pipe, one of 'em said it tasted of iron and the other of leather. And after it came to be drawn out of the cask, they found at the bottom a small key fastened with a piece of leather, which showed a very distinguishing faculty and great acuteness in the sense of tasting."

If my choice of excerpts from Byrd's diary and notebook suggest that he was a frivolous and light-minded person, I have done him a disservice. He was a hard-working diplomat and an industrious and prosperous planter, a leader in Virginia society. But he had an ironical sense of humor and at times wrote in an amused satirical vein. His writings have a modernity that makes them entertaining today without a panoply of scholarly footnotes.

If formal literature through most of the colonial period showed a dearth of humor, we must not conclude that Americans in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were all grim and austere. They were often earnest, diligent, and sober, but they probably enjoyed laughter as much as we do. A clue to the average man's interest in a merry joke may be found in the American almanacs intended to hang by everyman's chimney side. Almost invariably they contained comic anecdotes and humorous aphorisms. When Benjamin Franklin began to publish *Poor Richard's Almanac* with its crisp proverbs and short pointed anecdotes, he was following an old tradition. Almanacs provided a taste of earthy humor that anybody could enjoy. Franklin merely made a better selection than his predecessors.

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# Benjamin Franklin

## Lewis Leary

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In speaking about anything American, Benjamin Franklin is a good man to begin with. Years before the United States existed, he started things of which his countrymen continue to be proud, like libraries, civic clubs, volunteer fire departments, effective street lighting, and, not least, the use of humor as a practical device. For Franklin was solidly American, ingenious, practical, ambitious, and successful. His *Autobiography* testifies that his feet were on the ground, and that he did not stand still. No man of his time went so far, and few since have gone further. But because he not only started things, but also let it be known that he did, Franklin may sometimes be credited with more than he deserves. That is one reason why he stands confidently at the head of any native literary procession. Talking about himself, he produced his country's first masterwork.

Like Walt Whitman and Mark Twain and Ernest Hemingway, Franklin created a public image so attractive and palpable that it obscures the man who made it. Whatever influences of time or place or circumstance combined to produce the successful and whimsical plain-spoken homespun favorite remembered as Ben Franklin, the projection of this character was a literary exploit of the first magnitude. "He knew what he was about, this sharp little man," said D. H. Lawrence. "He set up the first dummy American." He was, said Thomas Carlyle, the father of all Yankees. He

was versatile, grave, and practical, using wit as a weapon and humor as a handmaid to success.

Franklin early learned canny control of an audience. "He has wit at will," said John Adams who was not always sure that he was fond of Franklin or approved of him. "He had humor that, when he pleased, was delicate and delightful. He had satire that was good-natured or caustic, Horace, Swift, or Rabelais, at his pleasure. He had talents for irony, allegory, and fable, that he could adapt with great skill to the promotion of moral and practical truth." A "jack of all trades," Melville would call him, the "master of all and mastered by none—the type and genius of his land."

Even as a boy of sixteen, Franklin gauged the temper of the "clan of honest wits" which in Boston encouraged his brother in the publication of a Yankee version of Addison's *Spectator*. With the essays which he then contributed to the *New England Courant*, literature in America may be said to have been born, with Benjamin Franklin as its single generative force. His neighbor Cotton Mather wrote more than he, and William Byrd in Virginia a few years later would write briefly as well. The Rev. Edward Taylor, secluded in the frontier town of Westfield, preserved notebooks filled with poetry which he did not allow published, though it was probably as good as any written anywhere at the time. Not ten years later, the Rev. Jonathan Edwards of Northampton would speak in Boston of theological insights which by mid-century would be set forth in beautifully mannered, precise prose. By then, Franklin had been long absent from New England, and he had taken literature with him, as if he had it in his pocket, neatly stowed, to be used as needed. Not until Ralph Waldo Emerson more than a hundred years later discovered, amid what Franklin had left behind, the materials for revelations of which Franklin could not have completely approved, was it to reappear to warm that chill region again.



ton Mather's well-meaning essays—and her position in life were amusing, for Boston seemed overfilled with husbandless women, most of them respectable, but others merry widows, keepers of dram shops or waterfront boarding houses. Her given name of Silence was grotesquely inappropriate, for she loved to talk, especially about her neighbors. But in the first three essays she spoke mainly about herself, who she was and where she came from, much in the manner of an pseudonymous writer of any English periodical essays. She admitted her "natural inclination to observe and reprove the faults of others" and was eager to dedicate this excellent faculty for the good of her countrymen. At sixteen, Franklin knew what literature was for. it could mend the manners of men by pointing to their errors; it could admonish and correct, laugh lightly at human frailty, and suggest practical patterns which insured success.

Silence Dogood's first objective observations were on education, in an allegorical dream of Harvard College through whose gates only those approved by Riches might enter. There sat Learning, but on a throne so high and so difficult of access that most of her worshippers "contented themselves to sit at the foot with Madame Idleness and her maid Ignorance," waiting for someone to help them ascend. To simple Silence Dogood, college men were a useless lot, "unable to dig and ashamed to beg." She spoke for all Yankees who worked unashamedly with their hands when she reflected

on the extreme Folly of those Parents, who, blind to their children's Dulness and insensible to the Solidity of their Skulls, because they think their Purses can afford it, will needs send them to the Temple of Learning . . . where they learn little more than how to enter a Room genteely (which might as well be acquired at a Dancing-School), and from whence they return, after Abundance of Trouble and Charge, as great Blockheads as ever, only more proud and conceited.

Like any good Bostonian, young Franklin was gallant in defense of women and their rights, allowing Mistress Dogood to reply to an attack against female idleness, ignorance, folly, and pride by asking: Who is less often drunk? Who swears less? Whose work, by tradition and truth, is never done? And why should not women

be proud, when men remain "such Simpletons as to humble themselves at their feet, and fill their Ears with extravagant Praises"? Whatever was wrong with women was the fault of men who denied women equal opportunities for education. Two weeks later women were talked of again, less gallantly, for the subject was their pride in clothes, especially in absurd wide skirts: "I would at least desire them," said the widow Dogood, "to consider whether they who pay no . . . Taxes, ought to take up more room on the King's highway than the Men, who yearly contribute to the Support of the Government."

Mistress Dogood also had notions of what poetry should be. She scoffed at transatlantic notions that good verse could not be written in colonial New England, and she pointed with pride to "a most Excellent Piece . . . entitled, *An Elegy upon the much lamented Death of Mrs. Mehitebeel Kitel . . . of Salem.*" She thought it "the most *Extraordinary* Piece that was ever wrote in New England," its language "so soft and easy," its expression "so Charming and Natural." What reader could be so callous as not to shed a tear over such lines as

Come let us mourn, for we have lost a  
Wife, a Daughter, and a Sister,  
Who has lately taken flight, and  
greatly have we missed her,

she, who on her deathbed,

kist her husband some little time before she expir'd,  
Then lean'd her Head the Pillow on, just out of  
Breath and tir'd.

England elegy, even to providing samples of useful rhymes, such as grieve us leave us, flower power, physicians expeditions "Then season all," she said, "with a handful or two of Melancholy Expressions such as Dreadful, Deadly, cruel cold Death, unhappy Fate, weeping Eyes," and the poem would be complete.

The longer they appeared, the more of Benjamin Franklin and the less of his mouthpiece appeared in the Dogood essays. Echoes of other ironic voices from abroad are heard in his suggestion that an insurance company be established for widows and for aged virgins over thirty, but it is the young Boston apprentice who compares the virtues of moderate drinking with the vices of drunkenness, and who painstakingly lists words and phrases from the vocabulary of tipping: *boosey, tipsey, merry, mellow, in a very good humor, almost froze*. Franklin kept his ears open for new rhythms, and his eyes open for local sights, like that of amorous sailors walking arm in arm with their doxies, or of predatory young women prowling dark streets with "pretty gestures," contributing thereby to "the health and satisfaction of those who have been fatigued with business or study" as well as to the prosperity of shoemakers.

Almost every tone that Franklin would later use was foreshadowed in these young essays, the first of their kind in the New World. When he borrowed from Addison, Swift, Defoe, or other men from abroad, Franklin scrupulously paid interest in native originality of phrase or incident. But not too much originality—nothing too much, neither in drinking nor wenching, not even in too great a departure from saying things as they had always been said. If Franklin could have had the patience or opportunity to read what T. S. Eliot was to write about how individual talent builds on tradition, he would certainly have agreed. If one were to persuade, simple practicality required that he must not seem eccentric or isolated. People respond to what is familiar. The trick was to provide the fillip which convinced without startling. For certainly, Franklin was later to submit, "an indiscrete Zeal for spreading an Opinion hurts the cause of the Zealot."

As a self-made writer, Franklin exhibits almost all the tendencies and attitudes discoverable in succeeding American writers of his kind, and he also shared opinions with others who were in most

respects different. When Thoreau in *Walden* spoke of the cost of any thing being the amount of life exchanged for it, he extended what Franklin had said about avoiding any action inconsistent with health or fortune "because 'twould cost you more than 'twas worth." Emerson in asking native writers to turn attention to common things, the meal in the firkin, the milk in the pan, and the song in the street, emphasized in precept what Franklin established in practice. As much as Whittier or Whitman or Harriet Beecher Stowe, Franklin aimed at an audience of simple people, and his language, more than theirs, reached the workingman. Like Mark Twain, he knew the leavening power of humor and the effective force of the tall tale. He was as gallantly flirtatious in compliments to ladies as he was capable in concocting Rabelaisian anecdotes for masculine ears. America's first periodical essayist, he was also her first humorist, in a line that includes Washington Irving, Artemus Ward, Mr. Dooley, Will Rogers, and James Thurber. Laugh, but avoid being laughed at: "Pieces of Pleasancy and Mirth," he said, "have a secret charm in them to allay the Heats and Humours of our Spirits."

As proprietor for almost forty years after 1729 of the *Pennsylvania Gazette*, as compiler of *Poor Richard's Almanac*, and as editor after 1740 of the *General Magazine*, Franklin instructed but also delighted many contemporaries. He had great fun reporting "A Witch Trial" in which persons accused of "making their Neighbour's Sheep dance" and "causing Hogs to speak and sing 'psalms" were submitted to trial by water which proved to be unsuccessful because the clothes which the witches wore "help'd to support them." In "A Meditation on a Quart Mug" humor and instruction are as subtly combined: it is not the mug which inebriates; like a newspaper, it is simply a vehicle of pleasure; what it contains may be dangerous or corrupting, but the vessel itself may remain a joy forever. Any paraphrase makes quite too plain the dry, laconic homely tone which goodnaturedly caught and captured and convinced colonial countrypeople.

or love affairs were to be carried on, or illness cured, it explained how to bake cakes, cure hams, and "the best time to cut hair, trim cocks, and sow salads." To fill spaces left blank among such practical matters, Poor Richard purloined wit and wisdom from the finest storehouses of Europe, printing such pithy aphorisms as "There's more old drunkards than old doctors," "After three days men grow weary of a wench, a guest, and rainy weather," and "Keep your eyes wide open before marriage, half shut afterwards." He anticipated Longfellow in advising "Let us then be up and doing." He anticipated Thoreau in counseling, "Read much, but not many books." He had no shame in changing Francis Bacon's "Reading maketh a full man; conference a ready man; and writing an exact man" to "Reading makes a full man, meditation a profound man, discourse a clear man." He recommended plain speaking: "The learned fool writes his nonsense in better language than the unlearned," he said, "but still 'tis nonsense." How strange "that a man who has enough wit to write a satire should have the folly to publish it." Poor Richard was a practical man who scoffed at poets; "Poverty, poetry, and new titles of honour make men ridiculous," he said with proper masculine, democratic scorn. And critics?

Bad commentators spoil the best of books,  
So God sends meat (they say), the Devil cooks.

Genial Poor Richard, however, was overshadowed by Father Abraham who was introduced in the almanac for 1758. His "The Way to Wealth" has been named an "American classic, *par excellence*," sharing with *Uncle Tom's Cabin* a century later the honor of "having passed by translation into more foreign languages than anything else," and bearing with it "the mark of our national spirit." More than seventy editions have appeared in English, more than fifty in French, eleven in German, nine in Italian; it has been put into Spanish, Dutch, Swedish, Welsh, Polish, Russian, Bohemian, Dutch Catalan, Chinese, and Greek; it has been done in phonetic writing and in Braille, to become after the *Autobiography*, the best and farthest known of Franklin's writings, containing the essence of his homely, practical, and good-natured wisdom.

Franklin had spoken before of frugality in "Hints for Those

Who Would Become Rich" in the *Almanac* for 1737, and more explicitly in "Advice to a Young Tradesman" in the *Gazette* for 1748. "Remember," he had said then, "that time is money," and "the way to wealth . . . depends chiefly on two words, *industry* and *frugality*: that is, waste neither *time* nor *money*, but make the best use of both." Father Abraham now tightened such advice with terse, workaday aphorisms, knowing, he said, that "a Word to the wise is enough, and Many Words won't fill a Bushel." He reminded readers that "The sleeping Fox catches no Poultry," that "He that rises late must trot all day," that "Laziness travels so slowly that Poverty soon overtakes him," that "Diligence is the Mother of Good Luck," and that success comes to him who will "plough deep while others sleep," so that "Early to bed and early to rise" really "makes a man healthy, wealthy, and wise."

Franklin's was the voice of the man in the homespun suit, with all the world before him for his taking. He spoke to apprentices and shopkeepers and servant girls who dreamed of fine houses and carriages and reputation. In 1744 he issued, as the first novel printed in America, Samuel Richardson's popular, didactic *Pamela* which four years before had reminded admiring English readers that, yes, a working girl might make good. As a city man, Franklin noticed the fields or woods or streams or skies which surrounded Philadelphia, not to remark on their beauty, only their usefulness. Some contemporaries complained that Franklin boasted of his nostrums "for the preservation of prudence, the cure of poverty," much "as quacks boast an infallible cure for the itch." He was to them a penny-pinching philosopher, everything, Melville was to say, but a poet who saw beyond appearances. This he was indeed, and with no apologies: his nostrums worked, and he could prove that they did.

But all work and no play could make Benjamin a dull boy, and Franklin was seldom dull, even when he talked of education (less Latin and more arithmetic) or politics or playing chess. Sometimes he paused to put together convivial verses:

All wicked bad livers, on mischief still thinking,  
For there can't be good living where there is not  
good drinking.

At other times he sang the challenge of love, and its failure in competition with convivial companionship:

Fair Venus calls: her voice obey;  
In beauty's arms spend night and day.  
The joys of love all joys excell,  
And loving's certainly doing well.

Oh! no!  
Not so!  
For honest folks known  
Friends and the bottle shall bear the bell.

One evening when Franklin sat with friends in a tavern, someone is said to have remarked on how unfitting it was for honest married men to sing hackneyed songs in praise of some poet's mistress. Returning home, where his own Deborah undoubtedly patiently waited him, Franklin composed a more proper song for proper men to sing:

Of their Chloes and Phyllises poets may prate,  
I sing my plain country Joan,  
These twelve years my wife, still the joy of my life;—  
Blest the day that I made her my own.

Not a word of her face, of her shape, of her air,  
Or of flames or of darts, you shall hear;  
I beauty admire, but virtue I prize,  
That fades not in seventy year.

Some faults have we all, and so has my Joan,  
But then, they're exceedingly small,  
And now I've grown used to them, so like my own,  
I scarcely can see them at all.

Springtime fancies were perhaps responsible for the Chesterfieldian "Advice to a Young Man in the Choice of a Mistress" which Franklin produced in 1745. "I know of no medicine," he then confessed, "fit to diminish the violent inclinations you mention; and if I did, I think I would not communicate it to you. Marriage is the proper remedy," man and woman united to "make one complete being. Separate, she wants his force of body . . . ; he, her softness, sensitivity, and acute discernment. Together they are more likely to succeed"; a single man "resembles the odd half of a pair of scissors." But, he continued, if you will not marry "and persist in thinking a commerce with the sex inevitable, then . . . in all your amours you should prefer old women to young ones." Their conversation is better, and their discretion. "Because in every animal that walks upright . . . the face first grows lank and wrinkled; then the neck; then the breast and arms; the lower part continuing to the last as plump as ever: so that covering all above with a basket . . . it is impossible to know an old from a young one." And finally, older women are to be preferred because "they are so grateful."

In 1746 Franklin expanded in "Reflections on Courtship and Marriage" an argument which Silence Dogood had begun more than twenty years before when she suggested that women might become quite as sensible as men if they could be educated to reasonableness rather than spoiled by pampering and flattery. Marriage was a good thing, but beset with problems. Swift did not write more sharply in disgust than Franklin did when describing how housewives often appear at breakfast:

Downstairs they come, pulling up their ungartered, dirty stockings; slipshod, with naked heels peeping out; no stays or other decent conveniency, but all flip-flop, a sort of clout thrown about the neck without form or decency, a tumbled, discoloured mob or nightcape, half on and half off, with the frowsy hair hanging in sweaty ringlets, staring like Medusa with her serpents; shrugging up her petticoats, that are sweeping the ground and scarce tied on; hands unwashed, teeth furred, and eyes crusted—but I beg your pardon, I'll go no farther with this sluttish picture.



of Europe by storm, reprinted in a score of journals, attracting the attention of Diderot and Voltaire, and returning to America to reign triumphant, in spite of John Adams's protest against it as "an outrage to morality and decorum," as America's first popularly successful short story. Polly was an honest but unfortunate girl, prosecuted for the fifth time "at Connecticut near Boston in New England" for having born a bastard child.

I cannot conceive [she said with naive lack of precision in choosing words], what the nature of my offense is. I have brought five fine children into the world at the risk of my life, I have maintained them well by my industry, without burdening the township, and would have done it better, if it had not been for the heavy fines . . . I have paid Can it be a crime (in the nature of things, I mean) to add to the number of the King's subjects, in a new country that really wants people?

The worst she had done was to deprive some clergyman or justice of peace of wedding fees. Can it be supposed, she asked "that heaven is angry at my having children, when to the little done by me towards it, God has been pleased to add His divine skill and admirable workmanship in the formation of their bodies and crowned the whole by furnishing them with immortal souls? . . . If you gentlemen must be making laws, do not turn natural and useful actions into crimes by your prohibitions."

She asked them to consider her first seducer, now a magistrate like themselves. She asked them to think of the harm done to society by celibate bachelors who

by their manner of living leave unproduced (which is little better than murder) hundreds of their posterity to the thousandth generation. Is this not a greater offense against the public good than mine? Compel them, then, by law, either to marry or pay double the fine for fornication each year. What must a poor woman do, whom customs and nature forbid to solicit men, and who cannot force themselves upon husbands, when the laws take no care to provide them with any and yet severely punish them if they do their duty without them? The duty of the first and great command of nature and nature's God, increase and multiply; a duty from the steady performance of nothing has been able to deter me; for its sake I have hazarded the loss of public esteem and have frequently endured public disgrace and punishment: and therefore ought, in my humble opinion, instead of a whipping have a statue erected in my memory.

No statue was erected—though one of the magistrates who sat in judgment was so impressed that he married her, and together they had fifteen children—but Polly is affectionately remembered by admirers who discover her a cousin to Defoe's Moll Flanders, Polly Peacham of John Gay's *The Beggar's Opera*, and Richardson's Clarissa. Her American descendants from Hester Prynne to Carrie Meeber and Eula Varner have not been more lively or likable than she. After Pocahontas, Polly is the first American heroine to triumph before a European audience. She captivated as a sensible female equivalent of practical Ben Franklin, who late in life explained to Madame Brillion that an additional injunction should be added to the Ten Commandments: "*Increase and multiply and replenish the earth,*" and who wondered why men who perform all manner of mischief by daylight, lying and scheming and destroying one another, "creep into corners, or cover themselves with the darkness of night, when they mean to beget, as being ashamed of a virtuous action."

Not for several literary generations was another native man of letters to write with equal vigor of doing what comes naturally. Mark Twain, who did not like Franklin (perhaps because he read only a few of his writings), would have been delighted with the older man's whoppers about American sheep with tails so heavy that carts had to be provided to support them, or his handsomely phrased denial that American streets were "pav'd with half-peck Loaves, the Houses til'd with Pancakes," and "the Fowls fly around ready to be roasted crying, Come eat me." He might have wished he had written, though secretly, Franklin's letter "To the Royal Academy of Brusselles" which recommended "some Drug wholesome and not disagreeable, to be mix'd with our common Food or Sauces, that shall render the Natural discharges of Wind from our bodies, not only inoffensive, but agreeable as Perfumes. . . . A pill of Turpentine no bigger than a pea, shall bestow . . . the pleasing Smell of Violets."

ever often these are demonstrated as traits common to the sensible eighteenth century or of an emerging, confident middle class, they were characteristics which Franklin set down and established because, in explaining himself, he explained his age. In doing so, he designed a pattern to which many of his successful countrymen would fit. Having made his fortune, the prosperous American then characteristically dedicates himself to good deeds and public service—Franklin in his mid-forties retired to do precisely that. Comfortably established, he has time to catch up on what he previously had no time for—like the languages which the older Franklin learned. He putters in his workshop over experiments and inventions. He goes abroad, as Lambert Strether or Sam Dodsworth did, to discover the riches of European cultures. He meets or corresponds with other men whose interests are like his. He discovers and encourages young men of ability, putting them through school, establishing them in business, showering them with advice, and standing as godparent for their children. Secure and with nothing to lose, he enjoys avuncular flirtations, daring compliments which a younger man could only risk if prepared to follow them through.

What separates Franklin from most people like him is that he did all this with such tumultuous energy that he leaves the best-intentioned imitators gasping. His political writings alone might have made his reputation—indeed, during his lifetime, they did. Without abandoning the urbanity learned from Addison, he assumed in attacks against England in such essays as “Rules for Reducing a Great Empire to a Small One” and “an Edict by the King of Prussia,” the ironic mask of Swift and the straight-faced, outrageous exaggerations of Defoe with such skill that students of satire place him among its masters because of his “unerring eye for an opening and relentless pressing of each advantage; the ingenuity and invention he exhibits in exploring and exploiting the historical situation; his skill in controlling irony, that subtlest of satiric patterns.” Molded to measures which moved his time, most of Franklin’s political essays can thus be relished for their skill in rhetorical organization or their deftness with words, but they are not likely to impress a modern reader with much besides their strong virtuosity. Like yesterday’s jokes, they speak clearly only when illu-

mined by knowledge of circumstances which created them or their fortuitous relevance to some similar situation today.

Among the most shockingly successful was "On Humbling Our Rebellious Rebels," which Franklin published in the friendly London *Public Advertiser* in 1774. Pretending alarm because robust but rebellious American colonials multiplied dangerously fast as a result of early marriages and the amazing fertility of their women, he proposed that all American males be gelded. This done, after "fifty years it is possible we shall not have one rebellious subject in North America." Meanwhile a crop of home-grown tenors would be produced, thus saving the tremendous sums which must be spent each year to import tenors from Italy. "It might likewise be of service to our Levant Trade, as we could supply the Grand Signor's Seraglio and Harems of the Grandees of the Turkish Dominions with Cargoes of Eunuchs, as also with Handsome Women, for which America is as famous as Circassia."

But Franklin spoke effectively from behind several masks. In "A Parable against Persecution" he so adroitly used a biblical style that some readers mistook his words for Scripture. When describing his experiments or inventions, he was straightforward and plain, whether the subject was an arrangement of balloons strapped about his shoulders to take weight off his gouty feet or a device by which short men might remove books or packages from a high shelf. His letters—on official business, to scientific associates, in friendly discourse, or of admonition and advice—were models, each of its kind. The inexhaustible energy, curiosity, and kindness of this multiple man are nowhere better revealed than in these letters which allow glimpses behind the familiar mask of doughty Ben Franklin to the intelligence and artistry that molded its features so well.

Like many men who glimpse truths which they find it wisest not directly to express, Franklin often spoke most effectively in banter. The indirection of humor could provide a defense against responsibility. Franklin's was the comic view—the world a stage,

or perhaps of men too sickly for manly competition, or of clergymen from whom worldliness was not to be expected. Sensible men would use it as a prod or lever or, later, as a way toward wealth. It was often most expedient for them to speak from behind a pseudonymous mask, as Washington Irving and Samuel Clemens would speak.

Under Franklin's aegis, the ventriloquist writer invaded the new world. Humor such as his remained a hedge from behind which many who followed him would exploit the comic view. Dialect would become effective because it identified itself with the plain American, simple and wise, sly and forthright at the same time, himself a kind of comic mask. The cracker box, woodland stump, town meeting and camp meeting, lyceum and Chautauqua, the quiz show and panel discussion, good things all, became forums from which this plain American spoke or oracles to which he listened. He became a sturdy, likable, and dependable fellow, this plain American who is grave but seldom serious, a good man to have around in almost any emergency, just as Franklin was, who invented him.



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# *The Satiric Mode: The Early National Wits*

*Lewis P. Simpson*

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The origin of the American Republic has a significant relation to the slow evolution—political, economic, sociological, literary—of a nationalistic ethos among a colonial people. But it is to be discovered more immediately and directly—and no doubt to the student of literature, more dramatically and convincingly—in the revolutionary, cosmopolitan rationalism of the Western Enlightenment. Indeed in the most immediate sense the Republic was an invention of the intelligence of the Enlightenment, which has one of its great embodiments in the highly expressive and frequently powerful writings of Franklin, Jefferson, Hamilton, and Madison. Their works—not less astute than articulate, not less political than literary—offer strong testimony to the way in which literature (in that broad sense of Dr. Johnson's definition: "Learning; skill in letters") underlay every activity of the educated mind in the eighteenth century. As products of this mind, the Declaration of Independence, *The Federalist*, the Constitution of the United States itself, represent literary as well as political achievements. Their makers constituted an American literati, who, like Locke and Voltaire, assumed their citizenship in the Republic (or Commonwealth) of Letters. This universal, frontierless polity of the mind had become the intellectual and spiritual homeland of the secular class of the literary and learned that had come into being upon the decline of the old Western clerical order. It reached the height of its dominion in the age leading up to the American and French

Revolutions, immediately before the onset of the integral nationalism that has marked the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

What I am saying by preface is, I realize, arguable. But although I cannot go into the complexities of the relationship between the new American government and the politics of mind in the eighteenth century, I venture to assert a decided emphasis on the intellectual cosmopolitanism of the early American Republic because it offers an approach to our understanding of the subject at hand: the satiric mode of the period.

Essentially this approach lies in assuming a connection between two general manners, or styles, of expression which largely constitute for us our general image of the mind of the early American Republic. One of these—the dominant one and the one that tends markedly to shape our impression of the intellect and spirit of the time of Franklin and Jefferson—is the large, deliberative mode characterizing the major documents of the genesis of the Republic. These render the image of a mind composed and assured, sophisticated and confident; above all of a mind of comprehensive capacities, capable of dealing adequately with historical conditions and contingencies.

This image of the mind of the early American Republic was profoundly meaningful for those who created it, and it retains its meaning today. It is the image of the mind that proclaimed the truth of the new Republic: that this government has been created not by the designs and armies of kings (nor, as Hamilton said, by "accident and force") but by the reflective act of the mind of man; and, moreover, has been created as an example of rational government for all mankind to witness. The new American Republic is, to be sure, to represent a new truth in history: the power of the rational mind deliberately to fabricate a political order on the basis of the consent of those to be governed under it; or, in other words, on the basis of the sovereignty of the rational mind of mankind. But when we examine carefully the implied attitudes of the makers of the American Republic, we discover that this truth rests on the assumption of the identity of the revolutionary mind and the edu-



on the basis of the corollary assumption that the mind of man operates in and through the exclusive literacy of the Republic of Letters. In a real sense the Declaration of Independence is addressed not to "the opinions of mankind" but to those held by the community of men of letters. *The Federalist* spoke less "to the people of New York" than it did to this same world, or its microcosm in America. The voice of the Constitution is "we the people," but the Constitution implies in its austerity and solemnity of tone a limitation on the dominion of the people instituting the new government. That the sovereignty of the mind of man implies the equality of all individual minds—lettered and unlettered—may have had some theoretical basis in the primitivistic notions of the age. But equality of intellect was not really contemplated by the eighteenth-century mind, which was rooted in the concept that mind and literacy are equivalent. The Republic of Letters was an order founded in the distinction—simple, fundamental, and ancient—between the man of letters and the man of *no* letters. The exclusiveness of literacy was an integral implication of the very mind that conceived of a government by the consent of the governed. To the eighteenth-century mind, as illustrated by the outlook of the great historian Edward Gibbon, for example, literacy and illiteracy constituted the difference between civilization and barbarism.

And yet, it is clear, in historical perspective, that the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and *The Federalist* inaugurated an order of society that instead of being set in the ground of tradition—in the distinctions among men—would refer its existence constantly to "the opinions of mankind"—or to "public opinion." It would be like no political order in history before it. The radically democratic implication of the American Republic became manifest in certain historical events in the years following the Revolution. Among these were two small but widely bruited rebellions, both inspired by frontier populism: Shays's Rebellion in Massachusetts and the Whiskey Insurrection in Pennsylvania. These and other evidences of a fateful rise of the common people in America seemed all the more significant because they were placed in the context of the French Revolution and its cataclysmic aftermath. When we depart from documents of the early American Republic, which are carefully couched in the deliberative style, we find in other writ-

ings of the age—political tracts, periodical essays, poems—a very different style. We find, to be sure, that if on one side the mind of the early Republic is characterized by rhetorical composure, on the other it may accurately be described as distinguished by an apocalyptic style. The apocalyptic mind shows two aspects. On the one hand, it was a mind infused with millennialistic or utopian prospects; on the other, it was a mind charged with fears of the imminence of a doomsday of social collapse. In either case—whether in apocalyptic dream or nightmare—the American imagination responded to the idea which occupied it more and more as the new order began to move in history, that America is a great experiment—not simply a government founded on natural law but a profound experiment in the very nature of man. Apocalyptic optimism held that in America human nature was being transformed; that it was undergoing an unparalleled process of spiritual and intellectual regeneration, and this to such an extent that human nature was being freed from any traditional image of man and society. There was a kind of ecstasy in contemplating this possibility, it was exalted into ecstatic historical generalization. Thus St. Jean de Crèvecoeur's noted leading question in the early 1780's: "Who then is the American, this new man?" And Crèvecoeur's declaration: "The American is a new man, who acts on new principles; he must therefore entertain new ideas, and form new opinions." An apocalypse of reason, it would seem, was occurring in America. By the 1790's, however, it seemed to some that what might happen would be an apocalypse of unreason. Apocalyptic pessimism held that the Americans were staking everything on the disastrous premise that the generality of human beings are capable of the reflection and judgment required for democratic self-government, when in fact they constitute an ignorant multitude ruled by vanity. According to the gloomy prediction of the distinguished Massachusetts congressman, Fisher Ames, the people of a democracy inevitably yield to the flattery of demagogues. And following this, still under the compulsion of their "dearest and most delusive" belief, namely that "the power of the people is their liberty," they end up in the tyrannical grasp of the one dem-

fall. The Revolution had been fought not "to subvert an old government" but "to preserve old rights." To regard it as the commencement of a great experiment was an utter delusion. By 1805 Fisher Ames saw the Americans taking the same downhill path all democracies in history had taken: "We are sliding down into the mire of a democracy, which pollutes the morals of the citizens before it swallows up their liberties."

The satiric mode of the literature of the early Republic is related to both the millennial and the doomsday attitudes toward American history. It is employed to decry the rule of kings and praise the rule of the people, and it is used to make prophetic lamentations of the coming of a complete democratic disorder. But, we must note, the division of the satire in the age of the early Republic into opposing phases of the apocalyptic mood is subject to qualification when analyzed in terms of specific satires. For in both phases the more notable examples of satire against the authority of kings and magistrates tend to be ambivalent in conception, strategy, and tone. They run to a rather grimly apocalyptic humor, celebrating the emancipation of man from the authority of the establishment in a manner as melancholy as optimistic. Some of them are quite humorless.

Consider, for instance, such a well-known attack on the British monarchy as Philip Freneau's "George the Third's Soliloquy." Freneau was a mighty hater of kings, but in this poem the King emerges as a suffering, disturbed, uncertain ruler, and the drama of his situation is poignant. He is caught in the trap of international politics. He cries out, "A desperate game I play." He feels that he is in the possession of "fiends of darkness" and of "powers unfriendly to the human kind." Freneau, an archliberal and an active patriot in the Revolution, unquestionably intended in "George the Third's Soliloquy" to create a portrait of the monarch as an unscrupulous tyrant, and in so doing to make him an object of scorn and ridicule. But Freneau's motive under critical inspection proves to have been more complex than his intention, and we see in his effort to depict the mind of George III a complex ambiguity in his own mind toward the meaning of the Revolution. Consider a similar ambiguity in John Trumbull's treatment of his fictional magistrate M'Fingal, in his mock epic of the same name. Intended

to be a pro-Revolutionary satirical attack on the Tories, this poem moves uncertainly between contempt for Squire M'Fingal and disdain of (it may be fear of) the mob that tars and feathers the Squire. The petty tyranny of M'Fingal seems minor in contrast to the tyranny of the mob that seizes him, gives him a drumhead trial, and sentences him to savage punishment.

Forthwith the crowd proceed to deck  
With halter'd noose M'FINGAL'S neck,  
While he in peril of his soul  
Stood tied half-hanging to the pole;  
Then lifting high the ponderous jar,  
Pour'd o'er his head the smoaking tar.

Consider a somewhat different kind of ambiguity in Joel Barlow's notable poem called "The Conspiracy of Kings." In it Barlow, who had gone from an early conservatism to a revolutionary position possibly to the left of Freneau, exults:

'Tis Reason's choice, 'tis Wisdom's final plan,  
To drop the monarch and assume the man.

Yet Barlow depicts the evil power of the institution of monarchy in such extreme terms that he virtually overwhelms the contrasting picture of the rule of reason.

High on a moving throne, and near the van,  
The tyrant rides, the chosen scourge of man;  
Clarions and flutes and drums his way prepare,  
And shouting millions rend the troubled air;  
Millions, whose ceaseless toils the pomp sustain,  
Whose hour of stupid joy repays an age of pain.

It is uncertain whether in tone and effect—as Barlow's intended satire lapses into declamation—"The Conspiracy of Kings" convinces us that the conspiracy is the result of kings or of the people, whether there is any real chance that man will learn to obey "Reason's choice" or continue to obey his "chosen scourge."

When we turn to satires predicated on overtly reactionary views of democratic developments in America—developments real or imagined—we find uncomplicated visions of present disorder and impending catastrophe. One of the best known of the doomsday poems in the writings of the early Republic is *The Anarchiad*, a mock epic written largely by Lemuel Hopkins, one of the famous Connecticut Wits. Conceived in imitation of Charles Churchill's *The Rolliad* (with a distinct bow to Pope's *The Dunciad*), *The Anarchiad* specifically attacks Shays's Rebellion and the Whiskey Insurrection. Its general import is the coming chaos these ominous evidences of democracy in America portend.

Lo, THE COURT FALLS: th' affrighted judges run,  
Clerks, Lawyers, Sheriffs, every mother's son.  
The stocks, the gallows lose th' expected prize,  
See the jails open, and the thieves arise.  
Thy constitution, Chaos, is restor'd;  
Law sinks before thy uncreating word;  
Thy hand unbars th' unfathom'd gulf of fate,  
And deep in darkness 'whelms the new-born state.

In the darkness that has become America, Anarch rules, awaiting the day when "tumultuous mobs," weary and desperate in the excess of their own disorder, ask for a king and heaven sends a wrathful one. In another satire of the doomsday variety, Timothy Dwight has a post-Revolutionary vision of America as the scene of rule of "the prince of darkness." This mock epic, entitled *The Triumph of Infidelity*, thoroughly loses its identity as a true mock epic in its prophecy of the damnation of the erstwhile "realms of freedom, peace, and virtue."

The ultimate doomsday satire by a writer of the early Republic was conceived not by a Timothy Dwight, strange to say, but by one of the most outspoken liberals, Joel Barlow. It would be inaccurate to say that Barlow finally returned to the conservative views of his early years. What happened was more complex and more dramatic: his experience of the power of Napoleon while he was in Europe on a journey that proved to be his last and that marked the end of his life. In Poland on a trade mission, he saw before him

in reality the apocalyptic nightmare of a Fisher Ames: the devastated world left by Napoleon, the dictator who had risen to power in the aftermath of a democratic revolution. Gazing in the midst of the bitter winter at the frozen dead of Napoleon's legions scattered across the Polish landscape, Barlow was inspired to write his "Advice to a Raven in Russia." Called "perhaps the bitterest satire ever written by an American," Barlow's poem, in a diction more intense and moving than he managed to achieve in any other work, advises a scavenging raven to seek his food in warmer climes ravaged by Napoleon instead of plucking at "Mere trunks of ice, tho' limb'd like human frames." The raven will not lack for food in the Southern countries, for in Europe every country lies "reeking with its people's slain/And not a stream runs bloodless to the main."

Now it is not surprising that satire in the early Republic—even satire that ostensibly is directed toward the elevation of democracy and the castigation of kings—turns toward a nightmarish vision of democracy. Although it is a highly flexible and adaptable genre and is capable of being employed to dramatize and criticize an infinite variety of situations and all kinds and conditions of men, satire is primarily conservative in inspiration. The satirical impulse stems from the fundamental conviction that pride, greed, and all forms of sin and folly are innate in man's nature. One of the leading features of the Enlightenment is the way in which satire appears as a major counterbalance to the emphasis on reason and the emancipation of the intellect. No greater critique of man's capacity for reason exists than that we find in such leading figures of the Age of Reason as Swift, Pope, and Voltaire. In their age reason and ironic humor are complementary; reason, it is not too much to say, is controlled by irony.

What surprises us about the satire in the early American Republic is its relative, at times one may say its complete, lack of the magnificent sense of ironic humor which informs the satiric mode the Americans were most familiar with: the mode of "wit," the dominating mode of the great English satirists—Dryden, Swift, Pope, and such lesser descendants in the late eighteenth century as Charles Churchill. Why did satire in America fail to develop the ironic motive? Why did it prove to be so lacking in this function

of wit? Congested with ironies, the American situation, it would seem, must have offered an exceedingly rich challenge to writers educated in the "wit ideal."

The questions I am asking are perhaps too complex to be answered beyond suggestion here. The wit ideal and the expression of wit is an integral part of the eighteenth-century conviction of the power of words rightly used to impose order and decorum on society. As practiced by the leading British satirists, wit—the sophisticated verbal play of mind on the follies and vices of man and society—is integrally connected to the ideal of the lettered mind and the discipline of letters. This discipline is the criterion of civilization, not merely in a formal sense but in the sense that the lettered mind is contained in the use of letters. Thus "true wit" is the expression of—the image of—the truly lettered mind which is at once the truly moral mind, the moral and literary foundations of civilized order being inseparable. It is this idealism that shines in Pope's famous lines in his "Essay on Criticism":

True wit is Nature to advantage dressed,  
What oft was thought, but ne'er so well expressed;  
Something, whose truth convinced at sight we find,  
That gives us back the image of our mind.

The rendering of the image of the mind of an age—this is what we have in the great satires of the eighteenth century. These can be quite pessimistic about the prospective loss of order in the world, but their underlying implication asserts a control of disorder. True wit in *The Dunciad* gives back not ultimately the image of the mind of duncery but the image of the ironic, controlling, judging, decorous literary mind prophesying an apocalypse of duncery in Pope's age. But this will not occur if true wit prevails. And it does prevail. It prevails in the power of the literary art of Pope's sardonic, ironic humor.

But the apocalyptic mind of the early American Republic did not find a controlling center in the ironic perspective cultivated by the Popean literary mind. For the American satirist to seek the truth of wit—to discover a way to give back of the image of the American mind—was to undertake a quest into a world as yet unexplored

by the literary mind, a world in which all the traditional norms and signs seemed obscured or obliterated, the world of an incipient equalitarian democracy. In America following the Revolution the literary mind increasingly experienced a severe sense of displacement. Central to an understanding of the melancholy of Freneau is his poem called "An Author's Soliloquy," which tells us a good deal about the ambivalence of his "George the Third's Soliloquy." The author speaks of his condition in America: "On these bleak climes by Fortune thrown/Where rigid reason reigns alone. . . ." And he imagines:

Thrice happy DRYDEN who could meet  
Some rival bard on every street:  
When all were bent on writing well,  
It was some credit to excel  
While those condemn'd to stand alone  
Can only by themselves be known.

This is an early expression of the famous loneliness of the American writer. For all his community with his fellow Revolutionists, Freneau feels that he does not belong to a community of wit, to the company of lettered minds. His poem implies the whole enormous question in American literary history: under the novel conditions of American life, can there be a literary life? Can there be a democratic wit? a democratic literary mind? Under the sovereignty of the people, can there be a sovereignty of the literary mind?

If Freneau suggests these questions, he never explores them very far in his writings. The most important exploration of them in the days of the early Republic occurs in a long, rambling, satirical work in prose by Hugh Henry Brackenridge entitled *Modern Chivalry: Containing the Adventures of Captain John Farrago, and Teague O'Regan, His Servant*. Like Freneau, Brackenridge knew the feeling of literary displacement. About a year after he published the first two parts of *Modern Chivalry*, he wrote: "Nature intended me for a writer, and it has always been my ambition. How often have I sighed for the garrets of London. . . ." Like Freneau, and Barlow, Brackenridge was democratic in his inclinations. Unlike them he knew the feeling of American life as it existed on the Penn-



sylvania frontier. For this reason he was more pragmatic than either Freneau or Barlow. In terms we use today he was something like a middle-of-the-road democrat. He saw the power of the many and the power of the few as necessary historical polarities. Democracy could work if the people were willing to be responsible to the obligations of their sovereignty. If they will "shew their majesty, the nobility of their nature, *by their discrimination, and their sense of justice.*" Any man among the people, Brackenridge says, "might be made a despot, but this can only be by the people's destroying the essence of liberty, by pushing it to licentiousness. A despot is a spectre which rises chiefly from the marsh of *licentiousness. It was the jacobins made Bonaparte what he now is.*"

Brackenridge was writing this observation in the final part of *Modern Chivalry* at somewhere around the time Barlow was contemplating Napoleon's "tentless troops . . . marbl'd through with frost" on the icy plains of Poland. But he does not assume the inevitability of a downward progress of democracy into despotism. In *Modern Chivalry* he creates a portrayal of the ironic realities of the first stages of democracy in America. The book turns on the struggle of a man of letters, Captain Farrago, to establish literacy as the general basis for action in the democracy of the frontier. Brackenridge, who came from Scotland to America in 1753 when he was five years old, was given the advantages of a college education by his hardworking parents and was graduated from Princeton in 1771 in the same class with Freneau. When he moved out into the Pennsylvania frontier country following the Revolution, Brackenridge went into politics, only after a brief success to find himself ousted from the legislature by a bumptious, no more than half-literate constituency. The voters did not appreciate it when he decided, for the sake of good government, to reverse his position on a land bill the frontier settlers wanted to see approved. The idea of *Modern Chivalry*, which occupied Brackenridge for twenty-five years and which he began as a Hudibrastic poem called *The Modern Chevalier*, loosely resembles the concept of Cervantes's *Don Quixote*. The leading characters are Captain Farrago, a middle-aged, bookish and scribbling dweller on the Pennsylvania frontier, and his servant, Teague O'Regan. A recent immigrant from Ireland, O'Regan is the reverse of Crèvecoeur's idealized American

immigrant, the new man in a new world. When Farrago decides to make a journey to Philadelphia and to take O'Regan with him, the two become involved in a long series of misadventures, all of them reflecting the political and sociological problem of the insurgent illiteracy of the growing American democracy. Aggressively ignorant, O'Regan displays a vanity that is matched, unfortunately, wherever he goes by the response of the populace. The people in every community want to elevate him. As the episodes unfold O'Regan threatens all the orders of society: the state (he is almost elected to the legislature); the church (he is almost made a minister of the gospel); letters and learning (he is almost made a member of the American Philosophical Society). Arguing that his servant is unsuited to a position requiring an educated mind, Farrago intervenes in each case. Finally he decides that O'Regan will sooner or later be in some position of importance; so he attempts to prepare him for responsibility. O'Regan becomes an exciseman, but he is tarred and feathered when he insists on actually collecting taxes. In the numerous subsequent episodes of Brackenridge's lengthy satire the author explores many instances of the fallibility of democracy. Although the thrust of the adventures of Farrago and O'Regan point toward the conviction that it is desirable to accept the sovereignty of the people as the operational ground of the American social order, Brackenridge never establishes a clear conceptual center in *Modern Chivalry*, a controlling irony as a perspective from which to view democracy. Farrago, the chief voice in the book, is a farrago of notions. At times he seems to be as foolish as his servant. But Brackenridge's large effort to assess the democratic experience as he saw it gets away from the apocalyptic compulsion. The formula of millennium or doomsday is avoided. Overall *Modern Chivalry* holds up the idea that it may be possible for men of letters to come out of men of no letters. A literary class primarily related to democracy may arise in the new Republic; a democratic wit and intellect—which Brackenridge associates closely with lawyers—may become a directing force.

However, a reader who looks at Brackenridge's satirical fable of democracy in America is constantly reminded that Brackenridge's education is still that of the eighteenth century. One may well feel that he is fumbling to devise a language in which what is happening

in America can be imagined. He offers his experience of the democratic situation but can offer no effective satirical resolution of it. He cannot truly manage it. The truth of wit is not available to him. The underlying, unintentional irony of his jerry-built work is the inadequacy of the traditional literary mind to cope with its displacement in a new world that became stranger every day.



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# Washington Irving

## Lewis Leary

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Washington Irving has been called the father of American Humor, but he was not. Ebenezer Cook, for one, preceded him, Benjamin Franklin and William Byrd, John Trumbull, Philip Freneau, and many another local wit. But Irving had the better chance, greater exposure at a better time, and his influence may be thought to have been greater. By the time he died, on the eve of the American Civil War, he had had more imitators than any of these others. Some, like Charles Dickens in England and Bret Harte in California, did better than he, though many others, like barnstorming Artemus Ward and Orpheus C. Kerr, probably had not known him very much at all. For Irving stood at the headwaters of an American stream which flowed finally in many directions. Though its sources may be found in the great wits of England, from Chaucer to Addison and Goldsmith, to Hazlitt and Lamb, it was quickened by fresh native springs. It has never quite lost the delicate tinctures which Irving added to it.

The doubleness of Washington Irving, which is the doubleness of humor, most especially of American humor, is first discovered when at nineteen he contributed a series of eight letters to a newspaper edited by an older brother. Almost one hundred years before, young Benjamin Franklin had done much the same thing in a series of letters which he pretended had been written by Silence Dogood, and part of the joke then was that Mistress Dogood was not silent at all, but a talkative and opinionated woman. Young

Irving used a pseudonym somewhat more subtle, less universal, and more distinctively American. He signed himself Jonathan Oldstyle, Gent., joining the familiar Yankee name of Jonathan, the perspicacious country bumpkin who was a popular comic figure on the American stage, to that which suggested a dignified personage who was conservative and retrospective, suspicious of what was new, preferring rather the old style to which he was comfortably accustomed. Furthermore, Jonathan Oldstyle was a Gent., one of the gentry, a gentleman, and that was part of Irving's joke, and it had local, and somewhat new, and very American connotations, for democracy seemed to say that, all men being created equal, all men had the right and responsibility to become just as equal as anybody else.

One assumes that, like Washington Irving himself, Jonathan Oldstyle was a member of the new, self-conscious, and perhaps spurious aristocracy of wealth which sprang up in the United States after the American Revolution. It was the pretentious new society which a few years later Fitz-Greene Halleck good-naturedly satirized in *Fanny* which in rollicking octosyllabics set forth the misfortunes of the pretty daughter of a local nouveau riche who sought a husband among the older, established New York families. It was the upstart, half-democratic, half-anglophile, money-making society that Fenimore Cooper would castigate in *Home As Found*.

As a member of the first generation of his family to be born in America, and as the youngest son of an immigrant merchant father who had become wealthy enough to allow him early leisure, Irving never could quite withstand temptations toward sly, but usually ever so gentle, observations on incongruities in the life-styles and intentions of longer-settled (usually Dutch) families of Manhattan, and of gadabout new society in New York or Ballston Spa, and, especially, of upstart Yankees from New England. Even when travel and fame had taught him to be something of an aristocrat himself, secure behind the decent and respected pseudonym of Geoffrey Crayon, Gent., and admired as the genial dean of American letters whose quiet home overlooking the Hudson River near Sleepy Hollow in Tarrytown became a Mecca for admiring visitors—even then, he could not utterly withstand quizzical temptations, though he had learned cautious control and had acquired a mask

behind which only the gentle twinkle of his eyes could not be hidden. No wonder that Fenimore Cooper, more securely to the manor born, disliked him. Cooper's humor, what he had of it, was blunt and boisterous and bruising, with no deception of geniality.

Jonathan Oldstyle pretended great contempt for innovation. Modern manners, modern marriages, modern modes of dress were objects of his ridicule in the letters which he contributed in 1802 and 1803 to the New York *Morning Chronicle*. His strategy was burlesque exaggeration, in the manner of Hogarth or Addison, with just enough intrusion of verisimilitude to insure a chuckle of recognition. When, for example, a bridegroom named Squire Stylish struts gravely into a room, "his ivory-headed ebony cane in one hand, and gently swaying his three-cornered beaver with the other," he is attired in a splendidly mod "suit of scarlet velvet, . . . the skirts stiffened with a yard or two of buckram; a long pig-tailed wig, well powdered, adorned his head; and stockings of deep blue silk rolled over his knees . . . ; the flaps of his vest reached to his knee-buckles, and the ends of his cravat, tied with the most precise neatness, twisted through every button hole." Nor was his bride less splendidly arrayed: her gown "of flame-coloured brocade" was flared ridiculously outward, in giant circumference, by a prodigious hoop, and it was embroidered all over with poppies and roses and gigantic yellow sunflowers.

This technique of exaggeration through caricature was as old as Theophrastus, as modern and as popular as Addison and Sterne, and, when applied to native idiosyncracies and native exploits, was to become one of the hallmarks of boisterous American frontier humor and of the slapstick buffooneries of the burlesque stage. Jonathan Oldstyle was on the right path certainly, and Irving was to move forward briefly later, exploring new and native comic possibilities. But now he looked over his shoulder backwards. There was little distinctively American, for example, in his remarks on modern marriage: they were as old as Eden, yet may seem to beleaguered husbands anywhere to be as true today as they have been every yesterday. "No longer," observes Jonathan, "does the wife tuck the napkin under her husband's chin. . . . The wife now considers herself as totally independent—will advance her own opinions, without hesitation, though directly opposite to his."

Perhaps the country people in the gallery of an American theater, described by Jonathan as pelting apples, nuts, and gingerbread on the heads of people below like thunderbolts from a plebeian heaven, may be thought of as presenting a kind of postparadigm of patriots at the Battle of Bunker Hill, a quizzical acknowledgement of the power of common people. And we may be tempted to discover democratic disapproval in Jonathan's description of a sharp-faced little Frenchman in trim white coat and small cocked hat who shook his fist at the gallery like "an irritable little animal," and to find in him local reference to emigrés, barbers, wig makers, dancing masters, and aristocrats, who swarmed to America in escape from the French Revolution, forgetting that the bumbling, irascible little Frenchman was a stock figure of stage comedy in England—as American, one might say, as roast beef or Yorkshire pudding, at best an imported commodity.

Much of Irving's humor, now and later, was borrowed from abroad. Strategies for the publication of the *Salmagundi* papers, in which Irving at twenty-four collaborated, were appropriated from Oliver Goldsmith's equally errant periodical the *Bee*. Irving was to remain a lifelong captive to the charm of Goldsmith, "the artless benevolence that beams through his works," his "whimsical, yet amiable views of human nature," his "unforced humor, blending so happily with good feeling and good sense." The Englishman's "soft-tinted style," his spontaneity and quiet humor, became and remained a tempting model.

But now in 1807 the young men who in *Salmagundi* would "instruct the young, reform the old, correct the town, and castigate the age, . . . interfering in all matters either of a public or private nature," were pert young Manhattan blades, quick with quip. They pretended genuine native distaste for neighbors who would spoil "honest American taste" with foreign "slop and fricasseed sentiment." Yet the Anthony Evergreen, Gent., and the Will Wizard, Esq., who contributed to it bore names which just as well might have been chosen by writers for a London periodical, though their associates Pindar Cockloft and Launcelot Langstaff may in their names reflect a pruriency, perhaps native, certainly jejune, which might not have issued from coffee houses by the Thames.

The subjects to which these young New Yorkers addressed themselves were often local enough: "This town," remarked



Launcelot Langstaff, is "remarkable for dogs and democrats." They were likely to look down their noses at their "queer, old rantipole city" and their whimsical new country which together supplied, they said, enough ridiculousness "to keep our risible muscles and pens going until doomsday." Theirs was an aristocratic pose: "Thank Heaven," one of them exploded in a tone not unlike that of H. L. Mencken more than a century later, "we are not, like the unhappy rulers of this enlightened land, accountable to the mob for our actions." They spoke with disdain, however, of the naiveté of visitors from England, and explained carefully how to identify a cockney among them. They laughed at young women who were too genteel to risk a walk with local gentlemen along the Battery which fronted New York harbor. They pretended enormous expectation for the New World: Noah, one insisted, had been born there, so that all the world besides was populated by migrating Americans. But their mode and their tone was mainly borrowed. Mustapha Rub-a-Dub Khan, an enlightened stranger from abroad, comments on peculiarities of people in their strange land much as Montesquieu's Persian and Goldsmith's Chinese philosophers had done.

But when two years later, at twenty-six, Washington Irving invented Diedrich Knickerbocker, a fresh new era in American literature and native humor began. *The History of New York from the Beginning of the World to the End of the Dutch Dynasty* as published in 1809 over the new pseudonym, is a boisterous comic epic which contrasts the braggadocio and limitless expectations of adventurers in the New World with the Homeric exploits of ancient Greek heroes, testing Old World ideals against the frontier requirements of the New. The wharfsides of Manhattan are compared to the "walls of Jericho, or the heaven-built battlements of Troy." Blundering Dutch heroes are measured against Achilles, the god of golden deeds. The mood is consistently mock-heroic as Diedrich Knickerbocker reveals "Many Surprising and Curious Matters," including "the Unutterable Ponderings of Walter the Doubter, the Disastrous Projects of William the Testy, and the Chivalric Achievements of Peter the Headstrong" in what he boasted was "the only Authentic History of the Times that Ever Hath Been Published."

Authentic it certainly was not, though much of it can be read as

personalized political satire, directed, for the most part, against Thomas Jefferson and his threats of democratic innovation. But readers need know little of American politics to chuckle over its droll burlesque. Many of the Dutch in New York did not like it, and Irving was so mercilessly attacked that he seldom dared such unrestraint again. But reviewers in Boston found Knickerbocker's *History* the wittiest book that young America had yet produced. In London it was greeted as "an honest attempt . . . to found an American literature. . . . The umbilical cord is severed. America is at last independent." It even reached frontier western outposts, "going the rounds," reported a witness in Mackinac, from the commandant of the fort to the smallest Indian trader, contributing "to their merriment and pleasure."

And well it might, for its humor was robust and hearty. Hendrick Hudson, who had discovered the bay of Manhattan, was described as a "square, brawny old gentleman with a . . . mastiff mouth, and a broad copper nose which . . . acquired its fiery hue from the constant neighborhood of his tobacco pipe. His vessel, the *Half-Moon*, which "floated sideways, like a majestic goose," was, like the fair Dutch maidens who inspired its building, "full in the bows, with a pair of enormous catheads, a copper bottom, and withal a most prodigious poop!"

Old Governor Wouter Van Twiller was "exactly five feet six inches in height, and six feet five inches in circumference. . . . His legs, though exceeding short, were sturdy in proportion to the weight they had to sustain; so that when erect he had not a little the appearance of a robustious beer barrel standing on skids." The renowned Wouter was not often erect, however: he preferred to sit and snooze, "would absolutely shut his eyes for two hours at a time, that he might not be disturbed by external objects—and at such a time the internal commotion of his mind was evinced by certain regular guttural sounds, exuding through his nose in monstrous snoring, "which his admirers declared were merely the noise of conflict" in his powerful, ever-working mighty mind.

Like Jonathan Oldstyle, Diedrich Knickerbocker looked longingly back to better times long past. How superior were the "delectable orgies" of teatime feasting among the old Dutch settlers compared to the effete fashionable "iced creams, jellies, or syl-

labubs; . . . the musty almonds, mouldy raisons, or sour oranges" daintily consumed in "the present age of refinement." In better, older times, the teatime company ate lustily until each member was glutted. properly armed with a sharp-tined fork, each would thrust dexterously at brown-fried slices of fat pork swimming in gravy, "in much the same manner," said Diedrich Knickerbocker, "as sailors harpoon porpoises at sea, or our Indians spear salmon in the lakes."

The white man's attitude toward the Indian was quizzically lampooned. Before white settlers came to the New World, the red man had

lived a most vagabond, disorderly, unrighteous life,—rambling from place to place and prodigally rioting upon the sumptuous luxuries of nature without tasking her generosity to yield them anything more; whereas it has most unquestionably been shown that heaven intended the earth should be plowed and sown and manured and laid out into cities and towns and farms and country seats and pleasure grounds and public gardens, all of which the Indians knew nothing about . . . they were careless stewards—therefore they had no right to the soil—therefore they deserve to be exterminated.

But the white man was benevolent, and did his best to ameliorate and improve the sad condition of these poor savages who were unable to ravage the land as effectively as the white man could. So the white man "introduced among them rum, gin, brandy, and other comforts of life—and it is astonishing to read how these poor savages learnt to estimate these blessings. . . . By these and a variety of other methods was the condition of these poor savages wonderfully improved; they acquired a thousand wants of which they had before been ignorant."

What voice is this that now speaks? There is in it certainly something of the bitter, transatlantic Irish wit of Jonathan Swift, but it anticipates also the caustic comic tone which Mark Twain more than half a century later would make a hallmark of American humor. Thus snuggled unobtrusively among the rich tomfooleries of Diedrich Knickerbocker's *History* appears an augury of that species of corrective comedy which catches the reader unawares: a stopper, Mark Twain might have called it, with a twist of inverted meaning that is derived, not through burlesque exaggeration, like

that which tells of Wouter Van Twiller's massive girth and prodigious snoring, but through understatement in mock seriousness which allows a speaker to pretend surprise when an audience finds his revelations comic.

If Washington Irving as Diedrich Knickerbocker can thus be said to have invented Mark Twain, he can also be said to be the articulate father of the burly, bluff burlesque, the extravagant mock gravity and massive irreverence of the American tall tale—as when he describes a sunbeam bouncing off the gigantic red nose of Antony the Trumpeter, acquiring from that nose such heat that it plunged “hissing hot” into the Hudson River “to kill a massive sturgeon that was sporting beside the vessel” in which the doughty Antony rode. And Diedrich's humor can be broad and mirthfully vulgar: Peter Stuyvesant, harassed in a duel, falls backward, Diedrich explains, “on his seat of honor” to land unceremoniously on a “cushion softer than velvet, which providence, or Minerva, or St. Nicholas, or some kindly cow, had benevolently prepared for his reception.”

But Diedrich Knickerbocker invented more than this. From his sacrilegious pages there emerges, for the first time in full, disreputable array, the American backwoodsman, but presented as a comic rather than an heroic character, much as he remained when Fenimore Cooper introduced him as Natty Bumppo a dozen years later in *The Pioneers*, before he dehumanized a fallible human character by remaking him in later *Leatherstocking Tales* into more of an intrepid symbol than a man. The backwoodsman portrayed by Diedrich Knickerbocker is fallible indeed, and very human. His name is Dirk Scouler, and he deserves remembrance as the progenitor of a long and lusty lustrous line which includes, not only Leatherstocking himself and all his quick-eyed, stealthily treading, honest fictional offspring, but Huckleberry Finn's disreputable father also, and many of the valiant vagabonds who appear on horse or motorcycle, bravely rapacious, in filmed adventures today—the scout, the advance man, the skulker just beyond boundaries of approved polite behavior, but a man who overcomes mammoth and menacing hardships, finally to succeed.

Dirk Scouler was “a kind of hanger-on . . . who seemed to belong to nobody and in a manner to be self-outlawed.” He was a

vagabond, a poacher, an interloper: "Every garrison and country village," explained Diedrich Knickerbocker, "has one or more scapegoats of this kind, whose life is a kind of enigma, whose existence is without motive, who comes from the Lord knows where, and lives the Lord knows how." Dirk lounged about Peter Stuyvesant's frontier fort, "depending on chance for a subsistence, getting drunk whenever he could get liquor and stealing whatever he could lay his hands on." Sometimes, because of his myriad misdemeanors, he would find it advisable to disappear from the fort, often for as much as a month at a time,

skulking about the woods and swamps, with a long fowling piece on his shoulder, laying in ambush for game—or squatting himself down on the edge of a pond catching fish for hours together. . . . When he thought his crimes had been forgotten or forgiven, he would sneak back to the fort with a bundle of skins or a bunch of poultry, which perchance he had stolen, and exchange them for liquor, with which having well soaked his carcass, he would lay in the sun [in] luxurious indolence. . . . [Dirk] was the terror of all the farmyards of the country, into which he made fearful inroads, and sometimes he would make his sudden appearance at the garrison at daybreak with the whole neighborhood at his heels, like a scoundrel thief or a fox detected in his maraudings and hunted to his hole.

But, though Dirk apparently showed "total indifference . . . to the world or its concerns" and was "a fellow of few words," he nonetheless kept his "eyes and ears . . . always open," so that in the course of his prowlings he discovered a plot among the enemies of the Dutch that would mean the downfall of the garrison. So he set out overland to warn Peter Stuyvesant in New Amsterdam, from which city Dirk had "formerly been obliged to abscond precipitately in consequence of misfortune in business—that is to say, having been detected in the act of sheep stealing." Surely, there again is the voice of Mark Twain, laconic in understatement. And foreshadowings of the mighty feats of woodsmen like Paul Bunyan are discovered as gallant Dirk, "after wandering many days in the woods, toiling through swamps, fording brooks, swimming various rivers and encountering a world of hardship that would have killed any other being but an Indian, a backwoodsman or a devil, . . . at length arrived, half famished and lank as a weasel," on the western bank of the Hudson River, "where he stole a canoe and paddled

over to New Amsterdam . . . and in more words than he had ever spoken before gave an account of the disastrous affair."

Like Faulkner's Sam Fathers, Dirk is part Indian, which explained, said Diedrich, his unusual propensities and habits. His appearance suggested that of almost any doughty woodsman in later tales of American Western adventures: "a tall, lank fellow" was Dirk, "swift of foot and long-winded. He was generally equipped in a half Indian dress with belt, leggings and moccasins." And then Diedrich Knickerbocker uses a phrase which may have long been a commonplace in the spoken vernacular and which, since Irving first wrote it in 1809, has passed down through many generations of tellers of tall tales. "It is an old remark," he has Diedrich explain, "that persons of Indian mixture are half civilized, half savage and half devil—a third half being expressly provided for their particular convenience. It is for similar reasons," he goes on, "and probably with equal truth, that the backwoodsmen of Kentucky are styled half man, half horse and half alligator."

As Diedrich Knickerbocker, Irving had the core of the matter in him, inventing or bringing together several of the attitudes and tones and modes which later and longer persevering hands would more securely mold to familiar native patterns. Perhaps stung by the bitterness of the reaction among New York friends against the gay burlesque of Knickerbocker's *History*, Irving never allowed his boisterous alter ego to speak so boisterously again. Yet almost everything for which Irving is now most affectionately remembered is told in the perspicacious words of Diedrich Knickerbocker. When, however, ten years later fame on both sides of the Atlantic descended on Washington Irving, he wrote most often then, and thereafter, in a quieter manner as Geoffrey Crayon, Gent., a gentle man whose gentle pictures of English life in *The Sketch Book* charmed but did not disturb. "Wit, after all," Irving had learned, "is a mighty tart, pungent ingredient, and much too acid for most stomachs; but honest good humor is the oil and wine of a merry meeting."

As Geoffrey Crayon, he built and maintained the reputation of being a remarkably placid and agreeable writer, deft and delightful, but only an extension, said Melville, of Oliver Goldsmith. A few critics, even then, in 1819, recognized that he had "lost something,"

writings had been remarkable. He had "given up something of his direct, simple manner," the "words and phrases, which were strong, distinct and definite, for a genteel sort of language." His native, American speech, "sent abroad to be improved, . . . had lost too many of her home qualities." His writings now seemed to another contemporary to "resemble a family of sickly but pretty children,—tall, feeble, and delicately slender," lacking vigor.

And these critics were correct. Little of the younger Irving's robust comic verve survives in *The Sketch Book*, *Bracebridge Hall*, or *Tales of a Traveller*, the three collections which in the early 1820's made Geoffrey Crayon's name a familiar household word. Irving's aim now was quietly to amuse, "to keep," he said, "mankind in good humor with one another." Even in burlesque portraiture, his comic touch became less vibrant, containing few barbs which might sting or anger.

Only seldom does Geoffrey Crayon allow himself such extravagant exuberance as romps through the story of "The Bold Dragoon" in *Tales of a Traveller*, in which "an old soldier, and an Irishman to boot . . . blarnied the landlord, kissed the landlord's wife, tickled the landlord's daughter, chucked the barmaid under the chin," and then proceeded to outdrink a fat distiller. Retiring befuddled to his room, he found his furniture all dancing—"a long-backed brandy-legged chair, . . . studded all over in a coxcombical fashion with little brass nails," led "an easy chair of tarnished brocade . . . gallantly out in a ghostly minuet." A "three-legged stool danced a horn-pipe, though horribly puzzled by its supernumerary limb; while the amorous tongs seized the shovel round the waist and whirled it around in a German waltz." Everything in the room swirled and danced, except the "great clothes-press, which kept curtsyng and curtsyng, in a corner, like a dowager . . . too corpulent to dance." The bold dragoon, a true Irish gentleman, pitied her loneliness, and asked her to "join him in a jig. But he reached toward her with such uncontrolled good will that she crashed down on top of him with a din that awakened the whole household. Sobered by his experience, the bold dragoon retired to rest. However funny, this is London music-hall slapstick of a kind which would be adapted to American vaudeville or burlesque.

for assistance, as he does in each of these collections of sketches, then the tales come robustly alive. The stories of "Dolph Heyliger" and of "The Storm Ship" in *Bracebridge Hall* are both "drawn from the MSS. of the late Diedrich Knickerbocker." "The Devil and Tom Walker" in *Tales of a Traveller*, sometimes identified as Irving's third-best story, was also reported to have been found among old Diedrich's papers. The better tales of "Rip Van Winkle" and "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow" are both identified as by the late Diedrich Knickerbocker, and which of these two is Irving's best still provides matter for critical discussion. They represent the high points of his literary career, when in his late thirties Irving did better than he was ever to do again. In them, the comic spirit of Knickerbocker's *History* is briefly joined to the genial descriptive vein which thereafter Irving genially and repetitiously mined.

Blundering, affable Rip Van Winkle has survived for a century and a half as a comic paradigm of the American male. He is "one of the boys" who never grows up, a "kid with a dog," content to roam the woodlands in search of game or to "fish all day without a murmur, even though he should not be encouraged by a single nibble." Rip is "a simple good-natured man . . . a kind neighbor . . . an obedient hen-pecked husband . . . foremost at all country frolics." When things went wrong at home, he retired to the village tavern "to sit in the shade through a long summer's day, talking listlessly over village gossip." His was a sleepy little village, nestled charmingly at the foot of the Catskill mountains, a small enclave of quiet rural contentment, surrounded and protected by the lush bounty of nature. It was the small town of pre-Revolutionary America, and when Rip returns to it after a sleep of twenty years, he finds it only a little changed. Disputatious people rant in democratic jargon about the rights of man, but the old tavern, though new-named, is there, and Rip's son is there, a replica of his younger self. Human nature blunders irrepressibly on.

More than the charm of Irving's graceful style insures long life to Rip Van Winkle. Hart Crane called him America's "muse of memory," its "guardian angel of a trip to the past" who reminds readers of something that is familiar because it is not altogether gone. Much has been made of Irving's deft transfer of Old-World legend to a New-World setting, of his use of familiar elements



of transatlantic popular lore as he transports Valhalla to the hills overlooking the Hudson, but these borrowed elements provide background only for what becomes a native comic legend. Rip survives as Huck Finn survives who would not be civilized either.

One of the most outrageously comic lines in "Rip Van Winkle," and one which certifies the tale as American, is slipped in without emphasis toward the close of the action, when Rip asks his daughter what had become of his wife. Mark Twain himself could not have contrived a more disorderly or more effective joining of comedy and pathos than she, in her laconic reply that her mother, Rip's wife, had died: "She broke a blood-vessel in a fit of passion at a Yankee peddler."

Yankees from New England had always been fair game to Diedrich Knickerbocker. In the *History of New York* they had been described as a "pumpkin-eating . . . notion-peddling people." But in the psalm-singing, lank and bony schoolmaster, Ichabod Crane, in "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow," the Yankee is more ruthlessly caricatured in all his Jonathan-like angularity, his awkward persistence in attempting to better himself by marrying the lush and wealthy Katrina, and his superstitious New England, Cotton Mather-bred doubts and fears. So persistent has been the memory of Ichabod that when in Faulkner's *The Hamlet* Eula Varner, also lush and wealthy, is wooed by her schoolmaster, she breaks from his arms exclaiming, "You old Ichabod Crane, you!" For Irving's Ichabod lives on, the mirror image of Rip Van Winkle. He is the busy American who plans to flee with the fair Katrina and make his fortune in the frontier west, and who finally leaves the rural village to become in New York a lawyer and then a judge, the successful, soulless American whose monstrous peccadilloes would be revealed on larger scale by Theodore Dreiser, Sinclair Lewis, and John Dos Passos. In a broad sense, he is a Yankee Flem Snopes, as impotent and predatory and hauntingly comic as Faulkner's ugly paradigm of democratic upward mobility.

Some forty years later, Mark Twain would first reach a national audience with a comic tale called "The Dandy Frightening the Squatter," in which a backwoodsman gets the best of an Eastern intruder. But, again, Irving anticipated him, for in "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow" Brom Bones, "a burly, roaring, roystering"

country man, broad shouldered, bluff, and "always ready for fun or frolic," outwits Ichabod who is also an intruder from the East. Brom has been called "a Catskill Mink Fink, a ring-tailed roarer from Kinderhook," the ancestor of many brawlers and braggarts who rip and roar in later American frontier humor, in tales told of Davy Crockett or Daniel Boone, in Mark Twain's writings, and in all the dime novels and films in which the country boy outlicks the city slicker. Brom is no Dirk Scuiler, no skulker on the outskirts of civilization. He is part of an emerging society, the guardian of its integrity against intrusion from without.

Perhaps we are tempted to discover too much meaning in "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow." Like "Rip Van Winkle," it is an imported tale, retailored to native requirements. But Irving's skill in caricature, in appetizing description of luscious food crowded onto Dutch tables, of dance and frolic and rich tomfoolery is genuinely his own. He never did as well again, though his sense of scene and comic character is briefly revealed in *A Tour on the Prairies*; mildly impious jibes at Yankee transcendentalism appear years later in "Mount-Joy," and "The Great Mississippi Bubble" sketches frontier life in a manner which looks timidly toward the lustier ironic realism of Mark Twain. However respectable these tentative reachings toward a native comic mode, Irving became increasingly a timid writer who seldom dared dangers of public disapproval. "Failure," said Melville, "is the test of greatness." Success such as Irving's, he said, is "proof that a man wisely knows his powers" and "knows them to be small." A younger Irving had opened doors which gave access to native varieties of the comic spirit. But he closed them quickly, after only brief glances. But he was there at the start, beginning more than he dared finish. Our gratitude to him must be great. Our understanding of his failures is inevitably sympathetic. For Washington Irving himself is perhaps the most representative comic figure of all, an early nineteenth-century J. Alfred Prufrock, who ventures only tentatively, then draws back, content to polish and to please. It was Melville again who warned that "there is no hope for us in these smooth, pleasing writers."





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# *Yankee Humor*

*Cecil D. Eby*

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The principal ingredient of New England humor has always been the seriocomic figure of the "Yankee," as the rural inhabitant of that region is called. The word itself has undergone at least three quite different evolutionary stages, but always it has carried a faintly derisive implication.

The origin of "Yankee" has eluded researchers (etymologists still quarrel over its probable derivation), but the generally accepted hypothesis contends that it is an Anglicized corruption of "Jan Kees"—or "John Cheese"—a pejorative term which the original Dutch settlers of New Amsterdam (now New York) applied to Anglo-Americans living in the adjoining state of Connecticut. After the collapse of the Dutch colony and the absorption of its inhabitants into the American mainstream, the word "Yankee" lay dormant until just before the Revolutionary War. As ill feeling between the British and the Americans intensified, the British revived it as a label of ridicule for those colonials demanding separation from the mother country. (As it happened, "Yankee" conformed, in this sense, to another American word originating at about the same time, the verb "yank," which means "to wrench violently" or "to pull with a violent jerk.") It is unlikely that by this time the "John Cheese" meaning was remembered. Presumably it was a British surgeon who wrote the satirical song, "Yankee Doodle," which lampooned the absurd incompetence of the American militia as it organized to fight the well-trained and

disciplined British army assigned to put down the rebellion. But to everyone's surprise, the Americans adopted "Yankee Doodle"—with all its absurd stanzas—as their first battle hymn and national anthem. Americans silenced British satire by joining in the laughter at themselves, by adding hundreds of stanzas of their own, and by turning a fictive American bumpkin named "Yankee Doodle" into a low-comedy figure unwilling to be intimidated by the formidable British lion. Thus the Yankee became the first of a long line of American antiheroes—that is, a scorned "common man" of little talent and even less sophistication who turned the tables on the "establishment"—in this case, the empery of Great Britain. The democratic note was struck and would be heard many times again in American belletristic and political writing—whether by Lincoln, Twain, Whitman, or Emerson.

It was this "Yankee" that entered and dominated the humor of New England during the first half of the nineteenth century. Subsequently the term, ever an elastic one, expanded to include other things. During the American Civil War, for example, Southerners labeled *all* Northerners "Yankees" even if they came from Western states like Ohio and Illinois. And by the First World War "Yankee" had become a blanket term throughout the world to designate *all* Americans whose behavior was less than exemplary. The pejorative quality of the word still remained, but the image of the simple New England rustic—a figure both ignorant but wise—had been erased from the word. As used here, "Yankee" refers to that prototypical New Englander who stamped his features indelibly upon the newly coined American character during the pre-Civil War period.

As a political creed in New England, democracy was accepted on theoretical grounds more thoroughly than practiced in fact. Suffrage was by no means universal, and political leaders were almost invariably drawn from families of some economic and social substance. Whereas Jefferson, a political radical of his time, called for a leadership measured solely by "virtue and talent," the principal New England spokesman, John Adams (who succeeded Washington to the presidency) adhered to the quadrivium—virtue, talent, *birth*, and *wealth*—as the four-pronged criterion of leadership. In

other words, the intelligentsia of New England, who inherited from their Puritan forebears the notion of an *elect*, generally reflected an aristocratical political position. As a matter of fact, the first six American Presidents, who served from 1789 to 1828, were but continuations of the English parliamentary governing class—all of them country squires like Washington and Jefferson or middle-class gentlemen like the two Adamses.

The election of Andrew Jackson in 1828 changed all that. Jackson was a representative of the western frontier, a man of humble origin, a frightening spectre of "People's Power." He was the first of that line of "log-cabin Presidents" who deeply resented Eastern banking interests and regarded all influences from Europe—particularly those from Great Britain—as subversive and detrimental to American ideals. On the other hand, the traditionalists viewed Jackson's rise into power as the first symptoms of runaway anarchism, as an explosion in the sewer which brought forth the unleavened mass of humanity recruited from urban mobs and country-bred know-nothings. His predecessor, President John Quincy Adams, was so distressed by the victory of Jacksonian democracy that he refused to attend Jackson's inauguration in Washington, lest his presence somehow endorse the political "revolution" which, he imagined, had seized the nation like a malignant plague.

The appearance of Jackson and his entourage provided a catalyst for the development of New England humor. Here was a target ideally situated for satirical barbs and dangerous enough (as the conservatives believed) to require deflation. To attack Jackson was also to attack the excesses of the system which he stood for. And certainly he laid himself open for satirical assault with his hearty hand-shaking mannerisms and, at times, abysmal ignorance. (Once, on hearing that the French Ambassador had prefixed a request with the words "je demande . . .," the President flew into a rage and swore that he was *darned* if any Frenchman would ever tell him what to do.) In short, the conservative faction seized upon the "common man" as rich vein of humor—but always there was political commentary lurking within it.

For this satire the prototypal "Yankee Doodle" figure was

Washington, most of the humor deriving from the naïveté of the literal-minded rustic who described what he saw. The creator of this fleshed-out Yankee was an otherwise unimportant writer named Seba Smith, who edited the Portland (Maine) *Daily Courier*. The adventures of his fictional character, Major Jack Downing of Downingville, Maine, were soon being reprinted in newspapers throughout the Republic, and they were so realistically conveyed that many readers came to believe that Major Jack was a real person. The Major, who traveled to Washington in order to find political preferment, joined the President's "kitchen cabinet" as general factotum and political adviser. He kept Jackson informed of developments back in Downingville and eased the great man's burdens by ingenious devices. At receptions, for example, the Major stood behind the President and reached under his shoulder to shake hands with the endless lines of Democratic admirers, each desirous of clasping their chief's hand. If today the humor seems contrived and dated, Smith's sketches did revitalize the caricature of the Yankee and did experiment in conveying the speech and metaphor of ordinary people. Readers found that the distance between themselves and the Head of State was not excessive, and they enjoyed the fictive exposé, with its intimate glimpses into the halls of the mighty. Henceforth Americans would always regard their chief executive with a coldly skeptical eye, and for this we may blame—or praise—Seba Smith, one of our first democratic "levelers." In time, the garb of Major Downing—striped trousers, bat-wing collar, shaggy top hat—became the costume of Uncle Sam, the present national caricature. Both were Yankee rustics, emblems of the common man placed in situations a little beyond his depth but usually able to muddle through to a satisfactory solution.

From the foregoing it can be seen that humor, for the New Englander, was a serious matter. Comedy had to be put to some sort of pragmatic test, as in political satire; it could not exist by and for itself, as it did in the American South. Puritans, after all, were a dour and high-minded folk who believed that if art had to exist, then it ought to dedicate itself to the norms of instruction rather than of amusement. New England humor contains none of the violence and grotesquerie that characterized the best of



Southern humor at this period. The comic artist held his materials tightly in check. If he drew blood, he used a rapier, not a bludgeon, and demolished his enemy by wit rather than by sheer strength. These features marked the humor of James Russell Lowell, the most effective political satirist during the decades preceding the Civil War.

Though born and nurtured within the conservative tradition—his family was one of the most distinguished in New England—Lowell belonged to a generation which was beginning to rebel against established modes of thought. Antislavery movements were gathering momentum during the period in which he attended Harvard College; Unitarianism was bringing into question the religious assumptions of the older theologians; American writers like Emerson were calling for a national literature which would reflect the distinctive features of American landscape and society. During the 1840's Lowell became a leading writer in behalf of the abolition of slavery, at first as a polemicist and finally as a satirist. The outbreak of the Mexican War, which he conceived as a flagrantly immoral design by the South to acquire more slave states, provided him with an opportunity for barbed attack. Along with Thoreau's *Civil Disobedience*, Lowell's *The Biglow Papers* voiced opposition to the policies of the federal government which were dragging the country as a whole into an unnecessary war.

*The Biglow Papers* follow the *Downing Sketches* in utilizing the New England dialect (although Lowell's philological studies were more scientific and extensive than Smith's) but introduce a greater variety of character types and a more biting satire than Seba Smith ever dreamed of. Chief among these characters was Hosea Biglow, intended by Lowell to symbolize New England's "homely common-sense heated up by conscience." The initial paper contains an antiwar poem by Hosea, who has just returned to his tiny village of Jaalam, Massachusetts, from a visit to Boston, where he had seen a recruiting sergeant "a struttin round as popler as a hen with 1 chicking, with 2 fellers a drummin and fifin arter him like all nater." He becomes infuriated by the sergeant's attempt to recruit him for the army and launches his homely attack:

They may talk o' Freedom's airy  
 Till they're pupple in the face,—  
 It's a grand gret cemetary  
 Fer the barthrights of our race;  
 They jest want this Californy  
 So's to lug new slave-states in  
 To abuse ye, an' to scorn ye,  
 An' to plunder ye like sin.

The language is strong (in one stanza he calls the American flag "a leetle rotten") and the tone is uncompromising and wrathful. Though not a learned man, Hosea has a keen and practical Yankee intelligence that permits him to reject pious appeals to high patriotism. The war is wrong—and he will not serve.

But obviously the Mexican War, like any other war, drew great numbers of human cattle eager to rally behind the recruiting sergeant's drum. To characterize one of this sort, Lowell created Birdofredum Sawin (or "Bird-of-Freedom Soaring"), a fellow villager of Hosea Biglow, who embodied what the writer called "that half-conscious unmorality" found in the American mainstream. Sawin joined the army and marched off to fight in Mexico, where he found not glory but mutilation. He lost an eye, a leg, and his left arm; he baked by day and froze by night. An unprincipled rogue, Sawin decides that he is fit for nothing useful in life except to campaign for the Presidency using his missing parts as evidence that he has dutifully served his country. In a letter announcing his candidacy he writes:

Ef, wile you're 'lectioneerin' round, some curus chaps should beg  
 To know my views o' state affairs, jest answer WOODEN LEG!  
 Ef they aint settisfied with thet, an' kin' o' pry an' doubt  
 An' ax fer surthin' deffynit, jest say ONE EYE PUT OUT!

*The Biglow Papers* established an antiwar tradition in American literature that, in its day, was intensely radical and mordant. In his later career James Russell Lowell became minister to Spain and to England and his voice grew more and more conservative. His best work built upon the framework of vernacular speech and

Yankee characterization which Seba Smith had laid down during the Age of Jackson.

The greatest difference in political coloration between Smith and Lowell lay in the latter's essential faith that the common man possessed a reservoir of good, plain common sense and the conviction that he could be encouraged to use it. Hosea Biglow, after all, functioned as counterballast for Birdofredum Sawin. Democratic government presupposed that the average man had a capacity for making the right choice, for spotting the fraudulent, for enlisting in the good cause. Later Abraham Lincoln, that super-Yankee whose satirical gibes once reduced a political opponent to tears in a public debate, affirmed this faith in democratic process during his Clinton, Illinois speech: "You can fool all the people part of the time and part of the people all the time, but not all the people all the time." Here was an economy of speech and practical turn of mind that any good New Englander would have endorsed heartily.

As the approaching Civil War cast its shadow across the United States during the 1850's, political humor in New England—as in the South—became more bitter and strident. The tradition of common sense appeared to have failed, for there was no reason why the sectional differences could not have been patched up. The old stereotype of Yankee did not flourish in a milieu of passionate intensities. Even the accepted feature of "Yankee-ness" began to dim. In the South, for example, all Northerners—whether of urban or rural origins, whether from New England or Minnesota—were grouped together as "damn-Yankees." It was not a time for humor or for fine discrimination. Lowell himself revived the *Biglow Papers* in order to inject a grain of common sense into the controversy. But it was too late, both for the country and for Lowell. His humor was no longer biting—it was bitter.

After the Civil War the figure of the rustic Yankee purveying good sense from his stronghold in the provinces became almost anachronistic. The center of political gravity had shifted to the cities and the day of the independent yeoman farmer was over. Rural New England produced, in the work of Sarah Orne Jewett.

always these stories featured the region in a state of declining population and prosperity. Invariably the central characters are aging or ancient folk (for the young people had fled to the cities) whose "Yankee-ness" primarily consists in stoically adhering to the old customs and habits of their grandparents and resisting new-fangled ways. Political humor absolutely disappears for the simple good reason that New England had become politically powerless with the rapid development of the American West. As might be expected, the best political humor of the postwar period was found in the cities where cartoonists like Thomas Nast and verbal satirists like Peter Finley Dunne found targets in the rampaging municipal corruption that characterized the period.

Today the original Yankee subculture has largely disappeared except in obscure byways of New England. Yankee Doodle now looks, dresses, and thinks like other Americans, and the dominant strains of contemporary humor belong to other subgroupings like the Afro-Americans and the Jewish Americans. Yet the rural New Englander retains his sparseness of speech, his unwillingness to waste words, his dry wit. The last true Yankee politician to occupy the White House, President Calvin Coolidge, was famous for his taciturnity. According to one story a lady seated next to him at dinner interrupted the Coolidgean silence by saying to him, "I have a bet that I can get you to say three words." "You lose," Coolidge replied. Major Jack Downing would have enjoyed this *riposte* by a fellow Yankee.





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# A Comic Mode of the Romantic Imagination: Poe, Hawthorne, Melville

Hennig Cohen

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The romantic age in America was, first of all, an age of innocence—optimistic, enterprising, bright with visions of progress and the main chance. The horizon stretched to the Pacific and beyond that to India. Emerson preaching his sermons on self-reliance, Whitman chanting his songs of the open road, Longfellow moralizing in a stately fashion on living in the present and thereby leaving footprints on the sands of time, were possessed of that vision which might be called comic. Fortunately for the history of American humor, there were others who viewed the same scene in a less optimistic light. Poe, Hawthorne, and Melville were not dazzled by the promise of the New World or the notion that mankind is perfectible. In an innocent age they had achieved a dark knowledge. It is in itself a sardonic joke, a comment on the blurred line between comedy and tragedy, that they produced some of the most interesting comic writing, albeit of a peculiar kind, of the romantic period.

The common reader knows Poe best for his tales of terror and madness—for "The Fall of the House of Usher," "The Black Cat," "The Cask of Amontillado." He knows Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* and Melville's *Moby-Dick* as American tragedies. The universe of these works is pessimistic, egocentric, guilt-ridden, and circumscribed by a profound sense of limitation. Yet it is these very qualities that led the author in the direction of comedy. For without a comic dimension their end point was some form of ~~catastrophe~~

or annihilation. Because comedy restores balance and order and sanity and possibility, their tragic insights made its countervailing force all the more compelling.

Comic satire is a traditional means of restoration, and Poe, Hawthorne, and Melville satirized manners, politics, the literary marketplace, the business world, technology, and ideas that contributed to self-deception and self-esteem. Comedy also permits a playfulness that reminds man he is still something of a child. Hawthorne wrote stories for children, but on occasion, for weighty purposes, he would adopt the pose of children's author and write in a bantering, playful way. All three enjoyed the play of wit and the joke for its own sake. Poe and Melville were playful in still another sense. They played with their readers, toying with them and pushing them about, sometimes not so gently, often making them the butt of their jokes. One might argue that in the instance of Poe, despite his job work and his declarations that he composed rationally, many of his compositions evidence the romantic imagination at play. In contrast to this lighter quality, comedy has an earthy side, a certain grossness that recalls man's animal nature. Hawthorne was never gross. In Poe's words, his was a "most delicate humor." But Poe himself has a cat story (of which more anon) worthy of Mark Twain, and Melville's descriptions of whales include extravagances that would have delighted Rabelais. Finally, comedy provides a means whereby the tragic writer can divert his reader when the pity and terror become unbearable, and allay the reader's sense of frustration when the logic of his story, as, for example, in Melville's "Bartleby," does not permit mitigation or resolution.

So Hawthorne's sober Surveyor of Customs for the Port of Salem, a man who cherished what he called "ancient customs," chanced one rainy afternoon to survey casually a pile of dusty documents in the attic of the customhouse. Among them he found "a small package done up in yellow paper," the private notes of an "ancient Surveyor," his predecessor of a century before, and "a certain affair of fine red cloth, much worn and faded." These discoveries he imparts to the reader. But first, with his customary touches of grave humor, he introduces the reader to life in the customhouse and to the quaint political customs that prevail there.



Melville's whaleship, the *Pequod*, carries comic ballast on its fated voyage, and Ishmael, who escaped alone to tell the story, tells it with many a comic flourish. As for Poe, he wrote sketches in which he labored mightily for humorous effect. In fact, a common problem with Poe is determining when his intention is serious, for even in his grimmest tales he sets off comic squibs.

When we attempt to classify the humor of Poe, Hawthorne, and Melville, we find it can be divided roughly into two sometimes overlapping groups, one in which humor is secondary or covert and another in which it is primary. In the former group, comedy is present within a larger context that is tragic, or if not that, then pathetic, horrific or splenetic. Hence we become curious, not so much in regard to the nature and variety of the comic devices as their function and effect. The latter group consists of overtly comic writing—individual tales, parts of novels, perhaps whole novels (e.g., Hawthorne's *The House of the Seven Gables* and Melville's *The Confidence-Man*). Typically, works within this group are characterized by their topicality, their relationship to the popular culture, and their folkloristic roots.

The presence of the comic where we do not expect to find it makes it more potent than it would otherwise be, and Hawthorne, with a light touch, can achieve a forceful effect. His first published story, "The Hollow of the Three Hills," one of his favorites and justly so, is a case in point. The situation is banal. A woman has deserted her parents, husband, and child with whom her "fate was intimately bound." She seeks information about them through a witch, and comes to realize that she has destroyed them and in so doing destroyed herself. The "hollow" that is the setting for this tale, is a symbolic landscape—circular, enclosing, sloping downward to a pool of "putrid waters." It is sexually suggestive, hinting at the nature of the lady's offense, and sterile and decayed, foreshadowing her retribution. Stunted pines that fringe the hillsides dwindle away to brown grass and then rotted tree stumps by the pool. The season is autumn and the time is sundown, and while the hilltops are still bright, the light has begun to fade within the hollow. Thus the setting is appropriate to the dark ritual which the guilty woman and the witch will perform, and symbolic of the woman's realization of her guilt. It is also one of Hawthorne's "neu-

tral territories," spaces that lie "somewhere between the real world and fairy-land," the geography of which he details in "The Custom-House" sketch introducing *The Scarlet Letter*.

In addition the setting exists in a time zone that is extraordinary: "In those strange times," the opening sentence tells us, "when fantastic dreams and madmen's reveries were realized among the actual circumstances of life . . . ." The word "realized" is crucial; for what Hawthorne suggests is that fantasies have become realities. Yet "realized" does not merely mean made real or brought into being. It also denotes grasping the meaning of the experience undergone, whether real or imagined.

What Hawthorne has achieved in his setting is a delicate balance between "actual circumstances" and "fantastic dreams," not so much as a stated quality of the "strange old times," or something so simple as a *donnée*, which of course it is, but as a condition created by his double meaning of the word "realized"—brought into being both in fact and in the imagination. These two meanings, which coexist in the same word, are the foundations for the symmetrical form he will construct. It is important to observe that "fantastic dreams" and "actual circumstances," fact and imagination, are antithetical. In a feat of Hegelian witchcraft, Hawthorne has synthesized them. An urge to place opposites in confrontation for the sake of conciliation, symmetry, qualification, or to enjoy the resounding crash, was characteristic of the Romantics. And in this story, at least a light touch of comedy exists as an opposing element.

The opposing principals in the story, "a lady, graceful and fair of feature, though pale and troubled" and "an ancient and meanly-dressed woman, of ill-favored aspect," sinner and witch, confront each other by prior arrangement. The sinner represents the fact of guilt, its "actual circumstances." The witch is associated with its imaginative reality, the "fantastic dreams" that she can induce and what they signify. They come together in the hollow of the three hills to conjure up three dream-visions: heart-broken parents, husband driven mad by grief and shame, child borne to the grave. The dream-visions are the sinner's realization, in Hawthorne's two-fold sense, of the results of her sin. The formal balance of the story is enhanced by a ritual of black magic that precedes each dream-vision, an inversion of Christian ritual and in implied opposition

to it, and by implied contrast between the sinner's former and present condition.

The heart of the story, then, is a model of balance, but in no way comic. However, this symmetrical structure is enclosed in a comic frame. The first and last words are those of the witch. She initiates the dialogue: "'Here is our pleasant meeting come to pass,' said the old crone. . . ." And, as the lady, overcome by the dream-visions "lifted not her head," the old woman pronounces the final words: "'Here has been a sweet hour's sport!' said the withered crone, chuckling to herself"—Hawthorne for once sparing us the dampening effect of a moral.

Slight comedy indeed. Our witch plays with words and is capable of amusing herself as she goes about her work. She looks forward to the amiable prankster of a witch in Hawthorne's "Feathertop" who makes a scarecrow come alive, and by way of contrast, the story suggests another witches' meeting in the forest, that of "Young Goodman Brown." The final notes of "Young Goodman Brown" are heavy-handed ambiguity and unmitigated gloom. "Had Goodman Brown fallen asleep in the forest and only dreamed a wild dream of a witch-meeting?" the reader is asked. No such question occurs in "A Hollow of the Three Hills," for here "fantastic dreams" and "actual circumstances" are both "realized," and the witch with her saving grace of comedy is a witch we can believe in.

Poe's "The Cask of Amontillado" and "Hop-Frog" are tales of revenge so horrendous that comic elements are scarcely expected to be found in them and certainly not expected to play an important part. In "The Cask of Amontillado," the narrator, Montresor, confesses that fifty years before he had buried alive, by masonry him into the walls of the family vault, one Fortunato, who had insulted him. "Hop-Frog" is about a court fool of that name, a crippled dwarf, who has been savaged by a jocular king and his sycophantic courtiers and in return contrives to burn them all alive. Within these revenge tales, Poe creates a comic resonance that is unmistakable. Their ambience is festive and Dionysian. The setting of "The Cask of Amontillado" is the carnival season. Fortunato wears motley, the costume of a jester. He is a com-

him, punning, as he will continue to do: "My dear Fortunato, you are luckily met." Similar wordplay occurs in "Hop-Frog" in which the narrator begins by informing us that he had never known "any one so keenly alive to a joke as the king was. He seemed to live only for joking." The king, in due course, will *die* as a result of some lively joking: a joke invented by Hop-Frog, his master of revels, as the climax of a masquerade, a joke played because the king had amused himself by forcing Hop-Frog, who had no stomach for it, to drink wine and has dashed a cup of wine in the face of Hop-Frog's exquisite little consort.

There is irony in Montresor's greeting of the unlucky Fortunato, but its depth cannot be known until the end of the tale. At its outset, the salutation appears more witty than ironical, and it suggests that whatever else Montresor may be, he has a sense of humor and the capacity for making a joke. The opening sentence of "Hop-Frog" is likewise a signal that what follows will be in some fashion comic, though by disappointing the reader's expectations regarding the nature of the comedy, Poe plays a joke on him. The vengeful Montresor plays a hideous joke on Fortunato, who wears caps and bells, but Fortunato has the last laugh. His ghost remains to haunt Montresor's conscience. The lowly, simian Hop-Frog (he "resembled . . . a small monkey") tricks the king and his courtiers into costuming themselves as chained orangutans, a prank to frighten the guests at a masked ball. (Says Hop-Frog: "the masqueraders will take you for real beasts. . . .") Thus Hop-Frog makes them his apes, reversing roles, and at the same time presents the king and the courtiers in a guise that befits their bestial natures. Thereupon, he hoists them on high and sets fire to their flammable garments, turning them into a living, blazing chandelier—for their enlightenment, and ours.

Like the *lex talionis*, in a primitive sense a ritual of revenge is restorative. But Poe has attempted something more complicated. He has qualified an horrific revenge by placing it in a comic ambience, a juxtaposition which also establishes a condition of comic incongruity. Then, though he takes the device of revenge seriously even while pushing it in the direction of an excess that approaches the parodic, he is willing to consider the idea that revenge is a joke, a practical joke, the business of jesters. By way of re-enforcement,

he is sportive, making the details of the revenge occasions for lesser jokes. "Come, drink! the wine will brighten your wits," the king commands the abstemious Hop-Frog. It does. "I shall not die of a cough," replies Fortunato when Montresor enquires with seeming solicitude of his health. He does not. Horror shares the throne with the Lord of Misrule and thereby rules more effectively.

The actors in Poe's revenge tragedies are not tragic heroes. They are grotesques—characters distorted and extreme in an emphasis on their own individuality. Furthermore, they are comic grotesques, virtually theatrical stereotypes. Fortunato is a jester, Montresor a practical joker. The monkeyish Hop-Frog is a court fool, the apish king is given to "practical jokes." Their grotesqueness attracts the reader's interest, but because it is unnatural and dehumanizing it does not gain his sympathy. Montresor is twisted by the idea of revenge that dominates him and becomes its embodiment. Fortunato is in every respect his equivalent. The deformed Hop-Frog and the bestial king are alike in an animality that makes them something other than human. An idea that walks like a man can be ludicrous and abhorrent; likewise a man who walks like an ape. Both are impure and unnatural. Hence we can detach ourselves from the fireworks at the end because comic as well as horrific elements are involved.

"There is a wisdom that is woe; but there is woe that is madness," Melville wrote in *Moby-Dick*. To be wise is to be aware of the great dark, Melville is saying, but it is unwise to see things too darkly. There must be balance. So when he described the "fallen" world of *The Encantadas* or Galápagos Islands, and the creatures that live there, he is at pains to mention both the bright and the dark. The islands are a burned-out place, resembling "heaps of cinders," the world as it might look "after a penal conflagration." They are enchanted in the sense that they are bewitched. Disowned by "man and wolf alike," they are populated by tortoises, lizards, sea fowl, outlaws, and an occasional castaway. Having depicted the "Plutonian" character of the islands, Melville asks this question: "In view of the description given, may one be gay upon the Encantadas?" And he answers that "the isles are not perhaps unmitigated gloom" (n.b. the "not perhaps") and points out that the tortoise, its most remarkable inhabitant, "dark and melancholy as

it is upon its back, still possesses a bright side." Melville's qualifications in this famous passage on the tortoise are numerous and his logic is slippery with wit. It is the underside that is bright; but Melville repeats that the tortoise, which he associates with "the identical tortoise whereon the Hindoo plants this total universe," is "both black and bright" as the world itself comprises both tragic and comic.

Melville concludes his *Encantadas* sketches with a description of a neglected cemetery and a somber account of a young naval officer, killed in a duel, who is buried there. But the pathos of his tone shifts quickly, and the book ends with the quotation of "a doggerel epitaph" inscribed on a marker by "some good-natured fore-castle poet." It reads:

O, Brother Jack, as you pass by,  
As you are now, so once was I.  
Just so game, and just so gay,  
But now, alack, they've stopped my pay.  
No more I peep out of my blinkers,  
Here I be—tucked in with clinkers.

The source of the "doggerel epitaph" is Captain David Porter's *Journal of a Cruise Made to the Pacific Ocean in the U.S. Frigate Essex . . .* (1815):

Gentle reader, as you pass by,  
As you are now, so once was I;  
As now my body is in dust,  
I hope in heaven my soul to rest.

Melville's adaptation of this rather well-known folk verse differs notably from the poetic epigraphs, in the main derived from Spenser and highly literary and portentous, that precede each of the ten *Encantadas* sketches. He has transformed a pious commonplace into graveyard humor. His mode of address establishes a human relationship rather than a polite relationship with the chance reader of the inscription. The language is more personal, colloquial and earthy. The beat jogs along at a faster pace and the rhyme of

the final couplet substantiates its facetious, vernacular quality. But Melville is consistent in his view of the Encantadas as a fallen world. In contrast to his source, he expresses no hope of heavenly rest even though his tonalities assert that the graveyard of his cinder heap is not perhaps unmitigated gloom.

Not only did Poe, Hawthorne, and Melville use comic effects to temper their predominantly tragic view. They also appreciated the ridiculous for its own sake. But their attraction to the comic was their sense of man's limitation and a concern for the spiritual, especially poignant in an age of enterprise and materialism. Their comic writing, often close to popular culture and folklore, found substance in the wildly speculative business operations of the expansive economy, the popular appeal of Yankee inventiveness, and the manners of a society in which sham and empty rituals assumed importance. On these subjects they made grim jokes.

Poe's "The Man That Was Used Up" is a retelling of an old folktale or joke, usually bawdy, about a lover who is disappointed to discover that the object of his affections is a bundle of cosmetic and prosthetic contrivances. LeSage in *The Devil Upon Two Sticks* (1725) provides literary analogues. He has Asmodeus describe "an amorous dotard, just come from making love. He has already laid down his eye, false whiskers, and peruke which hid his bald pate; and waits for his man to take off his wooden arm and leg" and an "old coquette" who "is a machine, in the adjusting of which the ablest mechanics have been exhausted. Her breasts and hips are artificial; and not long since she dropped her rump at church, in the midst of the sermon." Poe adapts this joke to his tale of a persistent quest to ascertain the true nature and history of "that truly fine-looking fellow, Brevet Brigadier General John A. B. C. Smith," a public man of remarkable parts. Poe's narrator is impressed by the general's handsome physique, noble bearing, resonant voice, and reserved manner but puzzled by a "rectangular precision, attend his every movement" and curious about the "mysterious circumstances" surrounding his military exploits.

bluestockings. Everyone appears to esteem the general and to be well-informed about him, but in each instance the narrator's inquiries are frustrated by interruptions. Exasperated, he calls on the general. He is conducted into the general's chambers by a servant, sees "a large and exceedingly odd-looking bundle of something . . . on the floor," and kicks it aside. To his dismay, the bundle addresses him in a squeaky voice:

"God bless me, my dear fellow . . . what—what—what—why, what is the matter? I really believe you don't know me at all."

"No—no—*no!* . . . know you—know you—know you—*don't* know you at all!" [the narrator expostulates in horror].

The servant explains that the bundle is General Smith in *déshabillé* and then begins the procedure of putting him together—cork leg, artificial arm, shoulders, bosom, wig, teeth, false eye and palate—while the general explains that he lost these members in a bloody fight with the Bugaboo and Kickapoo Indians, and lauds the ingenuity of the artisans who made the substitutes. The "matter" of which the general is comprised is essentially artificial. He is a mechanical man. But as the punning on the word "know" indicates, the narrator is in quest of knowledge that lies beneath appearances, and his systematic search reveals that the general doesn't really exist. The general is without substance, an idea, the projection of the artificialities of his society.

The structure of the story is equally artificial, a tissue of puns and significant names and a sequence of social set pieces in which the narrator is seen pursuing his quest. Each set piece pivots rather mechanically on a play on the word "man" used in a way which prevents the narrator from obtaining the information he desires. Thus, after the "public meeting," while a companion is explaining that the general has performed "*prodigies* of valor . . . you know, he's the man—" the general (the mechanical man) interrupts to introduce himself, with the words, "Man alive, how do you do?" and converses with seeming pointlessness about "the rapid march of mechanical invention."

Mechanical inventions are the general's pet subject, and while he is being patched together he gives the narrator the names and addresses of the ingenious Yankees who made his various appli-



ances. A number of them have been identified from advertisements in contemporary newspapers, and a model for the general has been found in Colonel Richard M. Johnson, a badly wounded hero of the Indian wars who was elected Vice-President in Van Buren's administration but was so unpopular that he was not renominated. Poe has his fun with these topical allusions, and it is not easy for us to share in it, but his mechanical man as the emblem of an age that places excessive value on technological progress and social appearances remains very much alive. Actually, he has an uncanny topicality, for ours is an age in which politicians and generals are fabricated by artful image-makers and our scientists are proficient in the replacement of human parts with transplanted organs and bits of plastic and wire.

Hawthorne's "Mrs. Bullfrog" is another treatment of the mechanical man, this time an artificial woman, and hence closer to the old joke. A finicky bachelor marries impulsively. On his wedding trip the stage coach overturns, and the jolt removes his bride's wig and false teeth along with her good temper and smashes a bottle of what she had claimed was toilet water but smells suspiciously like gin. But Mrs. Bullfrog recovers quickly. She puts herself together again, explaining:

"Mr. Bullfrog . . . let me advise you to overcome this foolish weakness, and prove yourself, to the best of your ability, as good a husband as I will be a wife. You have discovered, perhaps, some little imperfections in your bride. Well, what did you expect? Women are not angels. If they were, they would go to heaven for husbands. . . ."

And she adds that the dowry she brings him is real enough. Mr. Bullfrog is accommodating. He pronounces himself "fortunate" and accepts his bride "with an overwhelming gush of tenderness." Presumably, they live happily ever after. But the reader is made to see the sham beneath the appearance in both of them.

We have here a comic version of "The Birthmark," Hawthorne's justifiably better-known tale of the scientist so dedicated to perfection that he kills his wife in an attempt to remove the tiny birthmark that mars her almost perfect beauty. "Mrs. Bullfrog" also

her, and as such she is a poor relation of the shape-shifting hag in the Wife of Bath's tale. She is also probably the namesake of the transformed Frog-Prince in the Grimm fairy tale. Although comic, Hawthorne is sermonizing as usual, presenting a parable on the realities beneath the surface of an idealized marriage, but the story made him uneasy and he confided in his notebook, "as to Mrs. Bullfrog, I give her up to the severest reprehension."

If "Mrs. Bullfrog" is, for Hawthorne, cynical and a little gross, another tale of a mechanical man, "Feathertop" (named for his frizzy, foppish wig and his empty pumpkin head), is in no way reprehensible. For this delicately poised story, Hawthorne adopts the pose of children's author, retelling a tale he had "heard on my grandmother's knee." Mother Rigby, a witch who loves her work as much as her colleague in "The Hollow of the Three Hills," needs a scarecrow for her cornpatch. She decides not to make a hobgoblin "ugly enough to frighten the minister himself" but to "keep within the bounds of every-day business just for variety sake." Pleased with her handiwork, she makes the scarecrow come alive "for the joke's sake" by placing a lighted pipe in his mouth and commanding him "To puff away . . . your life depends on it." So the scarecrow puffs away "for dear life." Like General Smith, Feathertop cuts a fine figure in society though he moves about with a certain stiffness of gait, and Hawthorne observes in an authorial aside that his appearance arouses a sense of "ghastliness and awe . . . the effect of anything completely and consummately artificial, in human shape." The witch has a score to settle with the local magistrate, so she dispatches Feathertop to pay court to his daughter, Pretty Polly, a somewhat artificial young lady herself, given to admiring her countenance in the mirror. But Feathertop sees his reflection in the mirror, too, returns to the witch, and deliberately allows his pipe to die out. Because her artificial man had "too much heart to bustle for his own advantage in such an empty and heartless world," the witch puts him in the cornpatch to scare crows.

For Pretty Polly and the townspeople, impressed by his fine appearance, the scarecrow is a projection of their own superficiality, and Hawthorne capitalizes on his opportunities for satire.

The scarecrow's self-understanding and his decision to "exist no longer" softens the comic tone, but the focus of the story is on the witch, not the scarecrow, and she remains splendidly consistent. Like her counterpart in "The Hollow of the Three Hills," she frames and controls the story, but the comedy resides not so much in the playfulness of the language and the social satire as in the reversal of what we expect from folk tradition a witch to be.

Melville's *White-Jacket*, a novel based on his service in the United States Navy, is appropriately subtitled *The World in a Man-of-War*. Although its implications are cosmic, it is topical in its concern for improving the lot of seamen, and Melville creates a gallery of grotesques to document naval abuses. His masterpiece is the Surgeon of the Fleet, Cadwallader Cuticle, M.D. Dr. Cuticle is so devoted to his science that he is heartlessly mechanical. In a comic foreshadowing of the court-martial in *Billy Budd*, he assembles a panel of surgeons for consultation and then disregards the advice he receives while expressing regret at the necessity for a cruel operation. Science prevails with Dr. Cuticle as the law prevails in *Billy Budd*. The grisly episode that follows derives from an old medical joke. Dr. Cuticle performs a brilliant operation but he kills his patient.

Dr. Cuticle's appearance is in keeping with his spiritual desiccation. He is "withered, shrunken, one-eyed, toothless, hairless" and he wears a glass eye, false teeth and a wig; in short, he is a mechanical man. His pride and joy are his pathological specimens and an articulated human skeleton. Cuticle, like Ahab, is a distortion of an ideal and the result is dehumanization, but Ahab is portrayed in depth and complexity and emerges as a tragic figure. Cuticle is sketched in sharp, quick strokes and is a comic caricature.

The folktale about the disappointed lover, the popular image of the ingenious Yankee mechanic and the sense of the awful and ridiculous that Hawthorne, anticipating Bergson, felt in "anything completely and consummately artificial, in human shape" contributed to the motif of the mechanical man. As employed by Poe, Hawthorne and Melville, it served as a means of indicating the absurdity, to the point of dehumanization, of outward appearances

blem of the age, the Yankee trader, likewise the scion of folklore and popular culture, performed a similar function.

The mechanical man is an abstraction; the emblem itself is unsubstantial. The Yankee trader—peddler, salesman, diddler, confidence man—was gross flesh and blood. Perhaps this is why Hawthorne confided his delight in the spiel of an auctioneer at a New England fair to his notebooks rather than making a story out of it:

Bunches of lead pencils, steel pens; pound cakes of shaving soap, gilt finger rings, bracelets, clasps, and other jewelry, cards of pearl buttons or steel—"there is some steel about them, gentlemen; for my brother stole 'em, and I bore him out in it," . . . and saying to the boys who climbed upon his cart—"Fall down, roll down, tumble down—only get down"—and everything in the queer humorous recitative, in which he sold his articles. Sometimes he pretended that a person had bid, either by word or wink, and raised a laugh thus. Never losing his self-possession, nor getting out of humor;—when a man asked whether a bill was good "No!! Do you suppose I'd give you good money."

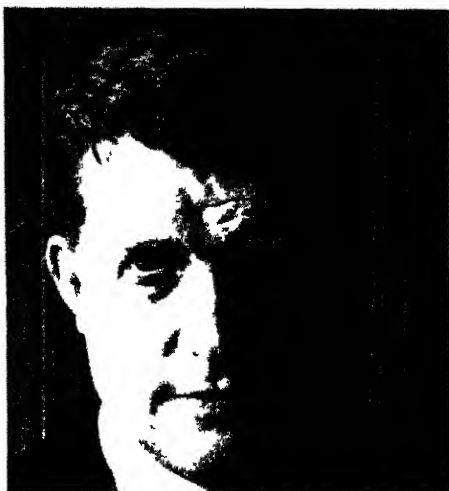
Poe, who longed for a dreamland "Out of Space—out of Time," had sufficient appreciation of the vernacular to enjoy the backwoods humor of Longstreet's *Georgia Scenes* (1835). "Seldom—perhaps never in our lives—have we laughed as immoderately over any book," he wrote in a review for the *Southern Literary Messenger*. The humor of *Georgia Scenes* is crude and earthy: gander-pullings, fights real and mock, and a horse trade sharp enough to please Poe's diddler.

Poe's "Diddling" is an anatomy of sharp business practices followed by a series of "modern instances." It culminates in a "rather elaborate diddle." An apparently "respectable 'man of business'" advertises for bonded clerks, requiring "testimonials of morality" and "a deposit of fifty dollars," preference given to the "piously inclined." The diddler collects the deposits and vanishes, leaving behind "young gentlemen . . . less piously inclined than before." "The Business Man" follows the career of a methodical man of business. His ventures, more or less successful, include the "Eye Sore" trade (buy property next to a handsome building under construction, erect a pigsty on it and dispose of it for a profit), Mud-Dabbing (soil a premise so as to be hired to clean it up) and Organ-Grinding (crank out noisy discord in order to be paid to

move on). The pinnacle of his success is "in the Cat-Growing way." Because of a superfluity, a bounty is offered on cats. The premium is four pence per cat tail, the tail being legally established at three inches. The business man purchases breeding stock. He finds that by careful feeding he can achieve six inch tails, the equivalent of two tails per cat, and by the application of an unguent, he can produce three crops of cat tails a year. Poe's interest in felines has also been recorded in "The Black Cat," an animal whose keeper treated it with less consideration.

Clearly, the urbane Poe was not as far removed from the tradition of frontier humor as it would at first seem. He differed mainly in that the city was his setting. His cat story is reminiscent of an episode in which Davy Crockett, short of funds in a grog shop, hoodwinks the bartender into accepting coonskins for drinks. He obtains an unlimited supply of whisky by stealing back the coonskins and trading them again.

Melville's *The Confidence-Man* is a novel about the greatest trickster of them all. Complex in its conception and language, rich in material drawn from the popular culture, folklore and literature, it presents a sequence of encounters between a con man in various guises and the victims he manipulates through their greed and their trust. It is a mordant comedy, so corrosive and ambiguous as to verge on the tragic. Thus Melville carried a comic mode of the romantic imagination to its logical conclusion.



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# *Humor of the Old Southwest*

*James M. Cox*

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First of all, there is the South. And the South is, as everyone must confess but very few remember to think about, beneath the North on all globes and wall maps. Even to go South in the mind is to go toward sin as well as sun. The Southerner is seen in the dominant Northern imagination as a little more poor, more ignorant, more lazy, more lawless, more violent, and more sensual than the Northerner. He is, after all, a figure of the lower regions, located, as he is, nearer to the equatorial belt which girdles the world.

If the location of the South on wall maps and globes poses one interesting possibility, the Old Southwest poses another. For what was the Southwest before the Civil War is now the Southeast. This is not at all true of the Old Northwest, which was made up of Ohio and Michigan. No one in his right mind would speak to-day of a Buckeye or a Wolverine as a Northerner. Another look at the map is instructive. Not only is the South beneath the North; it is also much to the west of it. It is well to remember that Atlanta is as far west as Detroit, just as it is well to know that Virginia's almost six-hundred-mile baseline piercing to Cumberland Gap reaches as far west as Toledo, Ohio.

There is, of course, an historical reason for our blurred sense of the original region. The Old Southwest, during the thirty years before the Civil War—the period when the Southwestern humorists flourished—was in the process of becoming the South,

for the sectional strife which steadily intensified from 1830 until 1860 was reorganizing the country on a North-South rather than an East-West axis. After the Civil War, the Solid South became a decisive region in the national mind. Once that happened, Northern Americans and even many Southerners all but forgot how far west the South is of New England.

But at the beginning of the nineteenth century, the region was truly the Southwest. As West, it was wilder than the Northeast; and as South it was already involved in the whole long loss to the North which culminated in bloody Civil War. There was, then, from the beginning in the Southwest, something wild and something lost. It was bad enough to feel the cultural impoverishment of America in general. Hawthorne felt it in New England and set about recovering for his countrymen the shadow of a colonial past. Yet starkly impoverished as New England was in relation to England, Hawthorne, Emerson, Melville, Thoreau, and Whitman were making a national literature for their country between 1830 and 1860. Seen against that literature, the literature of the South is pale indeed. Poe alone—the Bostonian somehow fallen into the South—stands out. And even he stands out as writer rather than as Southerner. He is most Southern not in attaching himself to landscape as the New Englanders were doing, but in disclosing himself as displaced person. He is the Artist as Rebel; and he is most rebellious in constantly threatening to divorce truth from beauty, morality from aesthetics, and cause from effect. His perversity, his demonism, his disease, his audacious demoralization of literature all conspire to place him conspicuously against the New England tradition, causing him to seem, in the Northern imagination, something of a fraud, as if all the traditions he inherited were somehow at the point of disintegrating into his possession. Yet whatever vulgarity the practitioners of high literature might ascribe to him, his power is there. Scorn it, belittle it, lament it, exclude it, and it runs underground to be embraced as a great original imaginative current by a Baudelaire.

Aside from Poe, only the humorists of the Old Southwest are truly dominant in our early literature. Set against the Northern humorists, they are clearly more interesting. Washington Irving, the true humorist of the North, is surely a match for them, but



Irving steadily moved away from his pseudonymous identity to settle at Sunnyside and become a writer of higher literature. He had left behind him "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow" and "Rip Van Winkle," both of which have about them something of the wild and humorous fantasy exposed through the elegant style of Geoffrey Crayon, *Gentleman*, and it is small wonder that "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow" was imported by Southern humorists, disguised in one form or another, and retold along "native" lines. The process was inevitable, it was just what Irving himself had done to German stories he had read.

Aside from Irving, the greatest of the Northern humorists was Seba Smith, who graduated from Bowdoin seven years before Hawthorne received his degree there. Smith invented Jack Downing as a correspondent for his paper, and through the rural vernacular of his invention he was able to make fun of politics and politicians, particularly of the Democratic Party and Andrew Jackson. Smith's down-east vernacular was impressive; it had an acute shrewdness, a folksy plainness, and, above all, a garrulous loquaciousness which nonetheless suggested the terseness of the stage Yankee. By persistently relating Jack Downing to the subjects of politics and history, Smith directed his folk morality upon the affairs of state. Yet for all his exposure of politicians, Jack Downing's deeper social morality and essential rural quaintness remain intact. James Russell Lowell does much the same thing with Hosea Biglow. By turning to verse, Lowell gains an even greater pithiness and homely flavor for his conventional morality. James Whitcomb Riley was much later to achieve a similar effect with his poems of Hoosier life.

How different are the humorists of the Old Southwest. If Poe differs from the major Northern writers in his divorce of beauty from morality, Southwestern humor differs from Yankee humor in its threat to divorce pleasure from morality. There is of course enormous risk in such a divorce, for unless the imagination makes up in invention, surprise, and extension of language *by virtue of* the diminution of moral pressure the result is likely to be little more than joke-book and almanac humor.

There were many of them—too many to discuss in detail in such brief space—but the work of Augustus Baldwin Longstreet, Johnson Jones Hooper, Joseph Glover Baldwin, Thomas Bangs Thorpe, Henry Clay Lewis, and George Washington Harris reveals the problems they encountered and the achievements they wrought. But a few more words about these writers as a group are in order.

First of all, they were determined to appear as gentlemen. Second, they tended to be professional men and political conservatives. Third, they were willing to be seen, just as they were willing to present themselves, as gentlemen first and writers second. Many of them sent their work to William T. Porter, a Vermonter, who edited a New York sporting magazine called *Spirit of the Times*, and Porter, one of the great editors of the nineteenth century, had the good sense to call for more and more of it. By and large, the writers received little or no pay for their work, and many never even collected their pieces, though Porter himself eventually made a fine anthology of them. Finally, their work generally took the form of sketches in which the polite language of the literate gentleman was made to surround and contain a frontier dialect.

Now the bifurcation between gentleman and yokel was not new; it was old as the hills and utterly inevitable in humor and comedy. The major contribution of Southwest humor lay in putting enormous imaginative pressure on both the gentleman and the bumpkin. The gentleman became more and more foppish and effete as the frontiersman threatened more and more to take over the narrative. The result was a language which, in the hands of the best of these writers, became a means of discovering a New World humor.

The problem as well as the possibility of Southwest humor is evident in the extraordinary work of Augustus Baldwin Longstreet, whose *Georgia Scenes* really ushered in the whole movement. Published in 1835, the same year in which Hawthorne's "Young Goodman Brown" and "The Haunted Mind" appeared, Longstreet made his way not into the moral wilderness of New England but into the comic and violent wilderness of the South. His "Georgia Theatrics," the brief but brilliant overture for the collection of sketches, is a refined clerical gentleman's recollection

of having gone into the "Dark Corner" of Lincoln, a county which, he says, was a shade darker than the rest of the country. Moving through the green glade of Nature, he hears ahead of him the most violent and profane language of men in mortal combat.

Yes I kin, and am able to do it! Boo-oo-oo! Oh, wake snakes, and walk your chinks! Brimstone and — fire! Don't hold me, Nick Stoval! The fight's made up, and lets go at it. — my soul if I don't jump down his throat, and gallop every chitterling out of him before you can say "quit!"

Hurrying toward the drama, the gentleman first hears one of the combatants scream in pain as his eye is torn out; then he hears the victor's cry of exultation. Appalled at the violence, he rushes through the undergrowth to the central scene, where he accosts the victor who is just rising from the fray. The youth replies to the morally vexed gentleman, "You needn't kick before you're spurr'd. There a'nt nobody there, nor ha'nt been nother. I was just seein' how I could 'a' *fout*." So saying, the embarrassed youth leaves the refined moralist with the truth. There has been no real victim. Instead, there are only the prints of the lone actor's thumbs where they had been plunged into the earth as he imaginarily gouged out his opponent's eyes.

This opening sketch seems to me an extraordinary transcendence of the convention it employs. Although it discloses the crude and violent imagination of the uncouth swain, it just as distinctly reveals the refined narrator's impulse to disapprove of the violence. To see that far into the sketch, and it takes blindness indeed not to see that far (though anyone disposed to feel superiority to the South is likely to be so blind) is to see that the refined moralist makes his judgment on the fight before he sees that it was imaginary. If the youth is embarrassed to be "caught" in his private theatricals, the old man has wanted the drama to be real so that he can enact his superior disapproval of the violence he is hurrying to see.

That sketch alone reveals the rare superiority of Longstreet's grasp of his subject. He realizes at once that the refined moralist and the violent youth are intricately related to each other. They

clusion. Evading that blush, the moralist can but record the experience in language self-gratulatory and overrefined. Unless we see the joke of the sketch and see that the joke is just as much on the moralist as it is on the violent youth—just as much, but no more—we are likely to emerge with interpretations which, emphasizing how the sketch reveals the violence of the Southern mind, miss that half of the joke which exposes the moralist's need of crudity and violence in order to achieve his moral superiority.

Good though Longstreet was in that opening sketch, he was not always so good. And his weakness came from leaning too much toward refinement, politeness, and culture. At his best, as in "The Fight" and "The Horse Swap," Longstreet establishes situations in which the violence and picturesqueness recoil through the enclosing structure and expose it for the polite frame it truly is. Thus, Ransy Sniffle—the name itself is but one more stroke of Longstreet's genius—in "The Fight" is truly a progenitor of Faulkner's Snopeses. The grotesque, cowardly and depraved poor white who eggs two men into a fight, he is not so far different from the effete style which counterpoints the story, for it too needs the contrasting violence of Ransy and his fight to amuse it. Still and all, the imaginative energy, the almost gloating delight, which the frame style assumes in delineating Ransy's depraved appearance, betrays an aggression in the story which the humor in it cannot quite discharge. In "The Horse Swap," surely one of Longstreet's finest sketches, the grotesque and sensitive sore, concealed beneath the saddle blanket, enables one confidence man to edge out another, for its goading pain makes the hopeless old nag prance about like a thoroughbred. Yet the very disclosure of that raw and sensitive wound is intended to appall as much as to amuse the reader. In making this visibly shocking disclosure as the humorous climax of his sketch, the refined gentleman averts his eyes, as it were, in the very act of completing his joke. Though Longstreet at his best was able to show his clerical gentlemen and poor whites in a humorous act of transcendent cooperation, he nonetheless has a moral as well as an aesthetic disposition to withdraw from his humor. That is why the edge he seeks is always in danger of being outside rather than inside his world. Even so, his achievements and limitations define the possibilities of Southwestern hu-

mor. First of all, there is Longstreet's own path, following the border between refinement and vernacular yet keeping an edge of refined perspective between it and the vernacular and using that edge to barter for literary audience approval.

Longstreet's greatest successor along that path was Johnson Jones Hooper. Pursuing the essential lines of Longstreet's form, Hooper nonetheless made a significant change. He discovered for himself a central character who could make successive forays into Southwestern dialect and experience. Hooper's discovery gave his work both unity and direction, for, once committed to his character, Simon Suggs, Hooper couldn't withdraw into the weak positions of moral and aesthetic security which fatally attracted Longstreet. True, Hooper incurred risks of his own, chief among them the repetition compulsion lying at the heart of all humor. Thus, anyone reading *The Adventures of Simon Suggs* is bound to feel the author's mechanistic compulsion to send Suggs off into one more picaresque foray.

For Suggs is, after all, the old picaro reborn as the frontier confidence man. By developing a mock-eloquent and refined perspective, Hooper can, like Longstreet, release Suggs all the more forcibly as an energy and a language. By exposing frontier amorality in Suggs's central maxim, "It is good to be shifty in a new country," Hooper gains the moral edge for his humorous maneuvers. Indeed, the amorality which compels Suggs to prey upon the foolish, the ignorant and the futile releases him as a kind of fierce, predatory, wild man, whose language possesses the imaginative energy to dilate the refined language into fancier and fancier forms of mock eloquence.

In order for Suggs's repeated depredations to remain in humorous perspective, Hooper has to distort and demean his lower-class world so that it can receive Suggs's raids without offense to a civilized audience. Thus, in "The Captain Attends a Camp-Meeting" (which Mark Twain drew on so heavily in *Huckleberry Finn*), the whole evangelistic revival world is exposed as a kind of moral and sexual chaos, devoid of any redeeming intellectual

tain him, for unless Suggs shows meanness, then the moral impulse in Hooper's enveloping frame cannot be activated.

Now one way out of the difficulty is to increase the imaginative investment in the framing literary language, thereby increasing the distance between the narration and the humorous character. Longstreet himself had managed such a maneuver in the sketches depicting Ned Brace, an irrepressible lying prankster. But it remained for Joseph Glover Baldwin in his *Flush Times of Alabama and Mississippi* to retreat almost totally into eloquent frame. If Longstreet's Ned Brace had cavorted in language as well as in act, Baldwin's Ovid Bolus, Esq., is all but completely materialized in the mock-eloquent narration. Although such a move makes any reader of *Flush Times* long for the colorful accents of Simon Suggs, Baldwin nonetheless repossesses a geniality which Longstreet and especially Hooper had been at the threshold of losing. Because he looks down on his subjects from a greater height, Baldwin can be more indulgent. As a result, *Flush Times* has a geniality of spirit which looks forward to Mark Twain's *Roughing It*. It is not really surprising that Baldwin himself made his way to California not as an outlaw, but as a judge bringing law and order into the territory.

Despite its recovery of geniality, Baldwin's refined perspective really loses more than it gains. For the future and ultimate power of Southwestern humor lay in discovering through dialect the direct experience of the frontier. The most dramatic example of that direct experience was the bear hunt. First emphasized by Davy Crockett, the bear hunt in one form or another had become the subject of innumerable stories. It remained for Thomas Bangs Thorpe, a Northerner who came to Louisiana, to realize the full possibilities of the bear hunt in one triumphant sketch, "The Big Bear of Arkansas." Retaining only the bare essentials of the frame, Thorpe practically turned over his entire sketch to the vernacular, making his bear hunter stand in the same relation to the bear that the refined gentleman stands in relation to the bear hunter. The bear embodies for the hunter the very wildness that the hunter embodies for the gentleman. If the bear hunter lives off and preys on the bear, so by economic implication does the refined frame live off and prey on the energy of the vernacular. That is why the

frontiersman, once he has in effect taken over the sketch, pours his imaginative energy into releasing the bear as monster, as god of the wilderness, as sought-for mate, as dream—yet grounded in vernacular realism. This is not all; if it were, we would have no more than “poetic” vernacular and vivid metaphors. The height of Thorpe’s imagination rests in embedding a joke so near the heart of his wild, free narrative that many critics have missed it. Thus, the bear hunter, after chasing the bear for years, is surprised by the bear during his morning defecation. Watch Thorpe make his frontier language all but conceal and circumlocute the “snapper” of his joke:

I then told my neighbors, that on Monday morning—naming the day—I would start THAT BEAR, and bring him home with me, or they might divide my settlement among them, the owner having disappeared

Well, stranger, on the morning previous to the great day of my hunting expedition, I went into the woods near my house, taking my gun and Bowie knife along, just *from habit*, and there sitting down, also from habit, what should I see, getting over my fence, but that bear! Yes, the old varmint was within a hundred yards of me, and the way he walked over *that fence*—stranger; he loomed up like a *black mist*, he seemed so large, and he walked right towards me.

I raised myself, took deliberate aim, and fired. Instantly the varmint wheeled, gave a yell, and *walked through* the fence, as easy as a falling tree would through a cobweb.

I started after, but was tripped up by my inexpressibles, which, either from habit or the excitement of the moment, were about my heels, and before I had really gathered myself up, I heard the old varmint groaning, like a thousand sinners, in a thicket near by, and, by the time I reached him, he was a corpse.

There you have the most novel imagination of America linked up with the oldest joke in the world—the joke of being caught *with one’s britches down*. Yet what ought to be embarrassment is converted into the very height of the tall tale happy ending.

That joke must have almost killed Thorpe, for in most of his work he withdrew into the moral superiority of the refined perspective. Thus he reduces Mike Fink to a kind of brutal killer as

perspective of antislavery. Yet in his one sketch he had, in the form of the tall tale, achieved a reconciliation of the wild and the genial which no one before him had secured.

If Thorpe withdrew from Louisiana, young Henry Clay Lewis, who came there from South Carolina, did not. Indeed, Lewis refused to be intimidated by the meanness implicit in Southwestern humor. Whereas Longstreet, Hooper, and Thorpe attempted to keep their moral edge, Lewis threatened to drop it even as he kept the refined frame. Instead of having a lawyer or clergyman as his refined narrator, Lewis, who was himself a doctor, brought forth an older physician to recall his adventures as a young doctor. The old narrator is at once indulging and amusing himself with jokes savage enough to make many readers uncomfortable. Lewis brings Negroes as well as frontiersmen into the foreground of his sketches. His "Cupping on the Sternum" is surely one of the finest pieces of humor in all Southwestern writing, yet just as surely it could hardly be assigned to a modern college audience without embarrassment. A kind of extreme version of almanac humor, it yet has the grace and the relentlessness of high sophistication as the old doctor recalls his youthful mistake in treating a Negro woman. His mistake, though grotesque in the extreme, is inescapably funny, a final horrendous joke which many and many a civilized person could never publicly acknowledge he had privately laughed at. There would of course be many others who could not laugh at the joke even privately, but surely they would have as big a problem as those who laughed at it too easily in public.

Lewis did not stop there. His "A Tight Race Considerin'" brilliantly plots a joke in such a way as to achieve the kind of elaboration of "The Miller's Tale," without ever losing character portrayal and vernacular realism. In such a tale, all the language and style of the past are brought together to be exposed with maximum authority. Lewis also did his own version of the bear hunt; his bear hunter, who has lost his leg to a bear, finally conquers a bear by beating it to death with his wooden leg! The best part of it all is that he is telling his story to the doctor who had made the leg. No lover of *Moby Dick* should be without a consciousness of Lewis's humorous vision of Ahab's vengeance. Even to begin to appreciate Lewis's work is to know what American



literature may have suffered with his death by drowning when he was only twenty-five.

Finally there is George Washington Harris, creator of Sut Lovingood. Harris drove himself deeper into frontier vernacular than any of his predecessors—so deep that his speaker, Sut Lovingood, embodies in their extremity all the amorality, savagery, meanness, and drunkenness of his progenitors in Southwest humor. But Sut is new. His dialect is practically a new language, for it is a deviation so remarkable that a reader must literally reconstruct his own language as well as Sut's if he is to understand it. Once the process of reconstruction begins, rich and wonderful possibilities of humor literally explode upon the page. Through it all, the figure of Sut Lovingood comes more and more to stand out as a new man himself. All but amoral, Sut seems to be the very principle of life and pleasure and chaos, all concentrated into his deviant language. He is, by his own definition, a "Nat'ral Born Durn'd Fool," and, aggressive though he is, his language reverberates with retaliation against centuries of repression. His very name, Lovin-good, signifies the profundity of his relation to the world of sexual love. There is no better illustration of his potentiality as Sexual Lord of Misrule than his performance at "Sicily Burns's Wedding." There, he takes vengeance on the bride who has tricked him in an earlier sketch (Harris's whole rich world vibrates along lines of practical jokes as displacement for vengeance) by tormenting a bull with hornets ("insex" Sut calls them). The chaos which that bull visits upon the wedding party speaks worlds about the whole sexual principle so fragilely held in check by social institutions.

I could go on and on about Sut, but it is best to define Harris's master joke, which is, I take it, the pursuit of illiteracy with a language so sophisticated that only the most urbane audience could read it. That joke is, as all great humor must be, on Harris as well as on the reader. For if the reader has to be extraordinarily sensitive to the uttermost reaches of language to read the voice of the illiterate Sut, Harris himself was beginning to imagine for himself not a broad public for his jokes but an elite readership that would probably have surprised even him. Either that, or a large trained audience which he had somehow educated.

Old Southwest disappeared beneath the powerful but sobering vision of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, just as "Dixie" was to be momentarily trampled beneath the martial rhythms of "The Battle Hymn of the Republic" (that song, also written by a woman, which is to this day sung by "peace" marchers—a fact that had better be a last joke for someone).

All these humorists might have been forgotten had not Mark Twain, whose whole genius was rooted in the tradition, made his way into the dominant culture and, by placating the moral sense in an absolutely disarming way, released more humor for more people than the old "gentlemen" would have believed possible. If Mark Twain's achievement is likely to be what sends us back to them, when we get there we begin to know how strong his origins truly were.

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# *Oliver Wendell Holmes*

## *Lewis Leary*

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Oliver Wendell Holmes probably possessed more minor literary virtues than any writer of his generation. He was a pert, bubbling little man, hardly more than five feet tall, famous for his conversation and his ebullient wit. He was popular as a lecturer, sought after as an entertainingly felicitous after-dinner speaker, and widely admired as a writer of deft light verse. His essays were read and admired by almost every literary compatriot. His novels, now almost forgotten, were filled with good talk and wittily turned character sketches, all strung upon plots only loosely knitted together. For Oliver Wendell Holmes was a miniaturist in literature, better at the small thing, intricately wrought, than on a larger canvas.

By vocation he was a physican, and a good one, who occupied the chair—which he preferred to call the settle—of anatomy at Harvard University for many years, and he was responsible for many medical reforms, but he is remembered for other things: his quick wit, the effervescent contagion of his good-natured raillery. Indeed his humor seems to have interfered with his professional career. Patients were disconcerted by a doctor who greeted them with such a cheerfully, disconcerting remark as “the smallest of fevers are gratefully accepted.” He should have remembered, he once said, that Shakespeare’s long-faced Hamlet was more universally admired than his clowns. People did not always realize, he said, that “laughter and tears are meant to turn the wheels of the

same machinery." The difference is that "one is wind-power, and the other water-power; that is all."

Like most humorists, Dr. Holmes was at root an exceptionally serious man, expert in determining what, to his way of thinking, was important, and what was not. The son of a particularly fundamentalist clergyman father who thought him too harum-scarum ever to amount to anything at all, young Oliver Holmes felt strongly the generation gap between them. He seems to have thought himself more to reflect qualities of his mother's prosperous mercantile family, the Wendells, than the rigid puritanicalism of the clerical Holmeses. Born and educated at Cambridge, and then a student of medicine in Paris, he became the very model of the proper modern young Bostonian, glib, aristocratic, and convinced that birth and breeding provided license to instruct, however lightly, and to condemn. Boisterous nineteenth-century America seemed endemic with diseases which might respond to the astringent medication of his wit.

Few men of his time or place were more personally popular, for his humor, even when corrective, was seldom caustic. His wit livened meetings of the famous Saturday Club where most of the literary greats of New England gathered for weekly meetings. He spent many summers vacationing in the Berkshires, a neighbor of Herman Melville and Nathaniel Hawthorne and Catherine Sedgwick at whose fictional sentimentalities he made good-natured masculine fun. They picnicked together, and the men talked over brandy and cigars, and later, when Herman Melville was ill, Dr. Holmes was called in to prescribe the rest and relaxation which the tightly-strung novelist so badly needed.

One of the most charming scenes recorded in American literary history is that of a picnic arranged to celebrate the recent marriage of James T. Fields, the Boston publisher of most of the men who contributed to the early nineteenth-century flowering of New England. Fields was a portly man who made it a point publicly to lament his avoirdupois. It was characteristic of Holmes playfully to suggest to the publisher that if he paid higher royalties to his authors, of whom Holmes was of course one, they might be able to eat more and he less, thus controlling his rotundity. The picnic was a triumph for the effervescent Dr. Holmes. When a brief shower

came, he improvised umbrellas for the ladies out of branches and leaves. While Melville morosely sat aside in gloomy contemplation, the little doctor darted here and there, keeping all the company in good humor, filling silver goblets with champagne, and managing the while to maintain a running conversation which probed lightly, among other things, into the question of whether Englishmen were superior to Americans. One can visualize the scene which suggests so much—is virtually a paradigm—of these two men, Melville and Holmes, the one withdrawn into himself and into who knows what thoughts of what depth, the other flitting brightly, the life of the party.

For Holmes did flit lightly over surfaces. His laughter was a pleasant protection against the vagaries of mad reformers, misguided clergymen, and poets like Walt Whitman and Edgar Allen Poe, both of whom seemed to most proper Bostonians undisciplined in taste and lacking in judgment. Though Dr. Holmes admired much in Ralph Waldo Emerson, and in some respects echoed in lighter vein some of his more prominent ideas, he did make playful fun of what he called the more “cobwebby” notions of the Transcendentalists. Reformers of any kind were victims, he said, of “inflammation of the conscience.” He insisted that

The ludicrous has its place in the universe; it is not a human invention, but one of the Divine ideas, illustrated in the practical jokes of kittens and monkeys long before Aristophanes and Shakespeare. How curious it is that we always consider solemnity and the absence of all gay surpluses and encounter of wits as essential to the idea of the future life of those whom we thus deprive of half their faculties and then call *blessed*!

He disliked any disputatious men who argued too much or who talked fuzzily or who took themselves too seriously. He distrusted, not only Transcendentalism, but any -ism which tied man's mind to certainty. Most of all, he disliked the rugged self-assurance of the Calvinism in which he had been reared in his father's house in Cambridge. Like Emerson, he was suspicious of all man-made logical schemes, especially the harsh logic of Puritanism which pretended, he thought, that rigidity was substitution for truth. Since boyhood in his father's parsonage, Holmes had rebelled against the certainties of Puritan Calvinism. To demonstrate that it was out of

date and that other strange notions like the efficacy of homeopathic medicine were out of date also, he wrote what is probably his best-remembered poem, "The Deacon's Masterpiece," which tells of "the wonderful one-hoss shay,/That was built in such a logical way" that it lasted without a sign of decay for one hundred years with everyone thinking it as strong and durable as it ever had been, until suddenly "it went to pieces all at once,—/All at once, and nothing first,—/Just as bubbles do when they burst."

But much of Holmes's humor is so topical that, unlike his one-horse shay, it failed even to outlive its century. As one of the many who found and proved provincial Boston to be the hub of America's universe, he named himself and his favorite literary companions the Brahmins of New England, men of discrete learning and taste like his fellow members of the Saturday Club, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow and James Russell Lowell, who were carefully correct as poets and who, like him, were or would be professors at Harvard University. Holmes, however, sprang to national attention earlier than most of the others of his generation. He was still a student in 1830, when aroused by discovery that the historic naval vessel, the frigate *Constitution*, famed for its part in the sea battles of the War of 1812, was threatened with destruction as obsolete, he dashed off verses on "Old Ironsides" which swept immediately through all the country, to become, as they have remained, a favorite recitation piece. How many through many generations remember having gestured magnificently on declaiming its stirring opening lines:

Ay, tear her tattered ensign down!  
Long has it waved on high. . . .

But for years Dr. Holmes's best fame was local, among the towns of New England where he lectured, usually on literature, to augment his professor's small salary, or at banquets where he was inevitably called on for witty lines to commemorate such popular events as the arrival of Charles Dickens in Boston or the anniversary of the landing of the Pilgrim Fathers. He was always good for a chuckle, as when he solemnly pronounced at the inauguration of a college president that

No iron gate, no spiked and panelled door,  
Can keep out death, the postman, or a bore.

Bores he disliked exceedingly, and he seems never to have been one himself. And he looked quizzically on people who wrote too much, who had an itch for scribbling without thought.

If all the trees in all the woods were men  
And each and every blade of grass a pen;  
If every leaf on every shrub and tree  
Turned to a sheet of foolscap; every sea  
Were changed to ink, and all life's living tribes  
Had nothing else to do but act as scribes,  
And for ten thousand ages, day and night,  
The human race should write, and write, and write,  
Til all the pens and paper were used up,  
And the huge inkstand were an empty cup,  
Still would the scribblers clustering round its brink  
Call for more pens, more paper, and more ink.

Whatever his local reputation, it was not however until he was almost fifty that Holmes achieved lasting national prominence. It came to him in 1857, when his friend James Russell Lowell planned to establish a new magazine and was unable to come up with a suitable name for it. So he came to the inventive Dr. Holmes who suggested that it be called the *Atlantic Monthly*. Holmes promised to contribute to it, which he did as a favorite among its readers for the next thirty years, first with a series of essays which he called "The Autocrat of the Breakfast Table," followed by another series called "The Professor at the Breakfast Table," then a third, "The Poet at the Breakfast Table," and topped off, when he was past eighty, with a fourth called "Over the Teacups." In these essays the genial irascibility of Oliver Wendell Holmes found most effective and most exuberant expression. They were conversation pieces in which people sitting around a table engaged in sprightly good talk. If it tended often to become a monologue in which the Autocrat, the Professor, the Poet, or the aging Dr. Holmes himself

monopolized most of the conversation, so much the better. Almost everything he said was worth a chortle or a gasp.

Most of these essays are colored with rambling, quiet humor, often reciting an incident, much as Mark Twain later would, with apparent great seriousness, with the humorous point, what Mark Twain would call the "nub," concealed until just the right moment, so that, when recognized, it would draw, in Holmes's writing, a quiet chuckle from the reader, never a boisterous guffaw. There was little boisterous in Holmes's quiet fun. Like Thoreau, he often approached what he thought to be a truth indirectly. For, he said,

Every person's feelings have a front-door and a side-door by which they may be entered. The front-door is on the street. Some keep it always open, some keep it latched, some locked, some bolted,—with a chain that will let you peep in, but not get in; and some nail it up, so that nothing can pass its threshold. This front-door leads into a passage which opens into an ante-room and this into the interior apartments. The side-door opens at once into the sacred chambers.

But, he continued, be careful to whom you entrust a key to your side-door:

If nature or accident has put one of these keys into the hands of a person who has the torturing instinct, I can solemnly pronounce the words that Justice utters over its doomed victim,—*The Lord have mercy on your soul!* You will probably go mad after a certain time,—or, if you are a man, run off and die with your head on a curb-stone, in Melbourne, or San Francisco,—or, if you are a woman, quarrel and break your heart, or, turn into a pale, jointed petrification that moves about as if it were alive, or play some real life-tragedy or other.

It is easy, that is, to avoid people who approach directly, but those—like poets or humorists—who insinuate themselves and their thoughts indirectly, to make you think or feel, these are the enemy, the torturers.

At other times he is more direct, dwelling on commonplaces of almost everyone's experience.

Don't you know how hard it is for some people to get out of a room after their visit is over? They want to be off, and you want them off, but they don't know how to manage it. One would think they had been



built into your parlor or study, and were waiting to be launched. I have contrived a sort of ceremonial inclined plane for such visitors, which being lubricated with certain smooth phrases, I back them down, metaphorically speaking, stern-foremost into their "native element," the great ocean of out-of-doors.

Then, somewhat deviously, he turns in analogue to the subject of literature, of bad poetry which lingers on as tenaciously as do unwanted guests: "Well, now," he went on,

there are some poems as hard to get rid of as these rural visitors. They come in glibly, use up all the serviceable rhymes, *say, ray, beauty, duty, eyes, skies, other, brother, mountain, fountain*, and the like; and so they go on until you think that it's time for a wind-up, and the wind-up doesn't come on any terms. So they lie about until you get sick of them, and end by thrusting some cold scrap of a final couplet upon them, and turning them out of doors.

This is quiet Yankee humor, nourished on understatement, innuendo, and gracious prose. It does not translate easily in time or space. Sometimes it was gently, but, oh, so gently, ribald, and when it was Holmes, like the early Mark Twain, was careful to put it into the mouth of someone else, as when he suggested:

All thought, my friend, the Professor, says, is of the nature of an excretion. . . . A man instinctively tries to get rid of his thought in conversation or in print as soon as it is matured, but it is hard to get at as it lies embedded, a mere potentiality, the germ of a germ, in his intellect.

But a healthy man will get rid of his thoughts, not only to avoid intellectual indigestion, but in self-protection and as a service to his fellow men. "Every real thought," he reminded his readers at another time, "knocks the wind out of somebody."

And knock the wind out of people Holmes did, but genially with quietly familiar entrance through the side-door as a welcome friend whose scolding was as well-meaning as well-phrased. People in New England still occasionally chuckle over the sometimes innocuously naughty strictures of these essays. But the verse which he occasionally included among them seems generally to have proved more memorable than the prose. Holmes himself thought

that "The Chambered Nautilus" with which he ended the *Autocrat* series in 1858 to be quite the best thing he ever wrote, and many people in his time and ours have agreed with him, especially about the last stanza which begins, "Build thee more stately mansions, O my soul." And the "Sun-Day Hymn" with which he concluded the *Professor* series is a favorite also, as in it the man of science succumbs to the man of faith who recognizes the "Lord of all being throned afar," whose "glory flames from every star."

Not many of Dr. Holmes's lines survive, but the few which do are cherished. His verse was to great poetry, he once said, what the tinkling of the triangle is to the combined harmony of the orchestra; but to tinkle the triangle, he went on, "was some accomplishment, especially when it sounded so long and so clearly in so many years." He wrote,

Not for glory, not for pelf  
Not, to be sure, to please myself,  
Not for any meaner ends,—  
Always "by request of friends."

For he was best as an occasional poet, expertly correct in metre and in rhyme, whose light verse could be counted on to grace any anniversary or ceremonious event. He dexterously skirts pathos when he compares Herman Melville's aging grandfather to "The Last Leaf" which clings lonely to barren bough, as

now he walks the streets,  
And he looks on all he meets  
Sad and wan.  
And he shakes his feeble head,  
That it seems as if he said,  
"They are gone."

The mossy marbles rest  
On the lips that he has prest  
In their bloom,  
And the names he loved to hear

Have been carved for many a year  
On the tomb.

My grandmamma has said—  
Poor lady she is dead  
Long ago—  
That he had a Roman nose  
And his cheek was like a rose  
In the snow.

But now his nose is thin,  
And it rests upon his chin  
Like a staff,  
And a crook is in his back,  
And a melancholy crack  
In his laugh.

But the little doctor satirizes old Major Melville in a kindly fashion, recognizing the mortality of all men:

I know it is a sin  
For me to sit and grin  
At him here;  
But the old three-cornered hat,  
And the breeches, and all that,  
Are so queer!

And if I should live to be  
The last leaf upon the tree  
In the spring.  
Let them smile, as I do now,  
At the old forsaken bough  
Where I cling.

For like all true humorists Holmes recognized in the absurdities in actions or appearances of other people, absurdities which he found also in himself. Not for him the statement "What fools these mortals be," but "What fools *we* mortals be."

He had great fun laughing at the absurdity of a maiden aunt, perhaps real, perhaps pretended, who went to ridiculous lengths to confine her increasing waistline:

My aunt! my dear unmarried aunt!  
 Long years have o'er her flown;  
 Yet still she strains the aching clasp  
 That binds her virgin zone;  
 I know it hurts her,—though she looks  
 As cheerful as she can;  
 Her waist is ampler than her life,  
 For life is but a span.

. . . . .  
 They braced my aunt against a board,  
 To make her straight and tall;  
 They laced her up, they starved her down,  
 To make her light and small;  
 They pinched her feet, they singed her hair,  
 They screwed it up with pins;—  
 Oh, never mortal suffered more  
 In penance for her sins.

And yet, for all this primping and squeezing,

Alas! nor chariot nor barouche,  
 Nor bandit cavalcade,  
 Tore from the trembling father's arms  
 His all-accomplished maid.  
 For her how happy it had been!  
 And Heaven had spared to me  
 To see one sad, ungathered rose  
 On my ancestral tree.

There was something buoyantly boyish about Oliver Wendell Holmes, something of quick alertness that never tires to maturity. Henry James the senior once told him that he seemed to him to be the most continuously alive man that he ever had known. At the

thirtieth reunion of his Harvard class, Holmes prepared verses on "The Boys," saying

Yes, we're the boys,—always playing with tongue or  
with pen,—  
And I sometimes have asked,—Shall we ever be men?  
Shall we always be youthful, and laughing, and gay,  
Till the last dear companion drops smiling away.

Holmes did keep youthful and laughing and gay to the end. His humor was in many respects different from that of his contemporaries. It derived more from the jovial spirit of the coffee houses in Augustan England, or of convivial, aristocratic clubmen of any time, or from the epigrammatic wit of Horace at his frolicsome best than from the boisterous American frontier. It played more often on words than on vulgar risibilities. It was often bookishly intellectual. Though genial, it was perhaps at root snobbish, well-dressed, well-mannered, excellently contrived to delight a cultivated mind. He preferred, he said, above all others "the man who inherits family traditions and the cumulative humanities of at least four generations." He was fond beyond almost all besides of good talk, conversations which moved quickly, wittily over a variety of subjects. "What are the great faults of ordinary conversation among us?" he once asked. And he answered himself by explaining that "Want of ideas, want of words, want of manners are the principal ones." But in conversation, he especially disliked contentiousness. "Talking," he explained, "is like playing the harp; there is as much in laying the hand on the strings to stop the vibrations as in twanging them to bring out their music."

He preferred to toy with ideas and to toy with words, teasing them to more expressive meaning. Though himself an irredeemable punster, he pretended great distaste for the pun; people who pun should be punished. "Let me lay down the law on the subject," he said. "Life and language are alike sacred. Homicide and *verbicide*—that is, violent treatment of a word with fatal results to its legitimate meaning, which is its life—are alike forbidden." And then he proceeded in his argument, he who disliked argument, with one of the

most telling and outrageous puns of all: Manslaughter, he explained is what homicide is about; man's laughter (which is spelled exactly the same) is the end of verbicide. He pretended dislike of people who might ask whether the deluge through which Noah is said to have piloted his Ark—whether this *deluge* was not a *deal huger* than any other flood. "People who make puns," he said, "are like wanton boys who put coppers on the railroad tracks. They amuse themselves and other children, but their little trick may upset a freight train of conversation for the sake of a battered witticism."

Yet it may be that Oliver Wendell Holmes's epigrammatic witticisms, so like those of Benjamin Franklin's "Poor Richard," will most surely survive. "Sin," he explained, "has many tools, but a lie is the handle that fits them all." Or again: "Habit is a labor saving device which enables man to get along with less fuel." He was sure that "We are all tattooed in our cradles with the beliefs of our tribes," that "We are all sentenced to capital punishment for the crime of living." With age, he rejoiced that "To be seventy years young is sometimes more cheerful and hopeful than to be forty years old." He was sure that "stupidity often saves a man from going mad," and that "The young man knows the rules, but the old man knows the exceptions."

As a physician, he observed that "Among the gentlemen that I have known, few, if any, are ruined by drinking. My few drunken acquaintances were generally ruined before they became drunkards. The habit of drinking is often a vice, no doubt, sometimes a misfortune, . . . but oftenest a punishment." As a man whose writings were greatly admired, but most often only by a small coterie of like-minded friends, he could muse on "How small a matter literature is to the great, seething, toiling, struggling, love-making, bread-winning, child-rearing, death-waiting men and women who fill this huge, palpitating world of ours." As a lecturer who livened his own talk with sprightly and entertaining learning, he could nonetheless assert that "All lecturers, all professors, all schoolmasters, have ruts and grooves in their minds into which their conversation is always sliding."

Unlike his Boston friend James Russell Lowell who sometimes frolicked in good, robust, common vernacular, and unlike Mark

Twain and the Southwestern humorists, Dr. Holmes's drolleries were most often most effectively dressed in sophisticated, learned, polite, even "literary" language. But he could accommodate himself when he had to, as he did in talking about "the wonderful one-hoss shay," to the language of the people. To call attention to the forthcoming publication of *The Autocrat of the Breakfast Table* as a book, he prepared an imaginary interview with the Autocrat's landlady who supposed that "Folks will be curious about them that has wrote in the papers." She described the Autocrat, who of course was Holmes himself:

This gentleman warn't no great gentleman to look at. Being of a very moderate dimension,—five foot five *he* said, but five foot four more likely, and I've heard him say he didn't weigh much over a hundred and twenty pound. He was light complected, rather than darksome, and was one of them smooth-faced people that kept their baird and whiskers cut close, just as if they'd be very troublesome if they let them grow,—instead of laying their face in the grass, as my poor husband that's dead and gone used to say. He was a well-behaved gentleman at table, only . . . he had a way of turning up his nose when he didn't like what folks said.

And he was a talkative little man:

Many's the time I've seen that gentleman keeping two or three of them [the other boarders] settin' round the breakfast table after the rest had swallowed their meals and after the things were cleared off. . . . And there that little man would set, . . . a-talkin' and a-talkin'.

Dr. Holmes did talk on and on, brimful of wit and contagious good humor. Late in life he produced what he called "medicated novels," to demonstrate that a physician could probe springs of human conduct better than a clergyman. *Elsie Venner*, the first and best of them, attacked the doctrine of original sin, but, like *The Guardian Angel* and *A Moral Antipathy* which followed, it is today of hardly more than passing interest because of its early foreshadowing of some of the psychological methods of Sigmund Freud. For Dr. Holmes was not at his best in serious and extended writings which required argument. He spoke most effectively with quips, which entered, as he had said, the side-door of his readers' minds.

James Russell Lowell hit him off well in *A Fable for Critics*, where he wrote of Holmes as

matchless among you for wit;  
A Leyden-jar always full-charged, from which flit  
The electrical tingles of hit after hit.

. . . . .  
His are just the fine hands to weave you a lyric  
Full of fancy, fun, feeling, or spiced with satyric  
In so kindly a measure, that nobody knows  
What to do but e'en join in the laugh, friends and foes.

So light and bright and good-natured was his humor that he made no enemies. His wit more often traveled delightfully over surfaces than penetrated to depths. His pinwheel mind darted exuberantly, hovering over serious thought as if afraid to alight. It was a native trait perhaps, the kind of comic coloration often taken on in self-defense, the rapier wit which pierces quickly to put an adversary off guard. He is closer to Washington Irving, whom he admired, than to Mark Twain, who puzzled and troubled him. But, if not in the main channel of American humor, Oliver Wendell Holmes at least bubbles brightly through tributary streams which continue occasionally to refresh. He would, I think, have liked it that way.







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# *The Misspellers*

## *Brom Weber*

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One of the chief distinctions creditable to American literary humor is the achievement of Charles Farrar Browne, a mid-nineteenth-century humorist. Browne, or Artemus Ward as he was popularly known, became the first American writer to earn a truly national reputation during his lifetime. He accomplished this feat in the 1860's, at the start of the American Civil War, when one might expect that national turmoil was too discomposing to permit any humorous writer to be read widely or at all.

Emerson, Whitman, Longfellow, Holmes, Melville, Lowell, Whittier, Hawthorne, and other important contemporaries of Ward had already published some of their major writings by 1860. Nevertheless, it was Ward, rather than any of these men, who was read enthusiastically from the Atlantic to the Pacific, who attracted large audiences in a Western village or an Eastern city when he appeared on the lecture platform. Again, it was Artemus Ward, rather than any other mid-nineteenth-century writer, who wrote so perceptively and freshly about national life that he became an acknowledged favorite of war-time President Abraham Lincoln. An irrepressible humorist, Lincoln appreciated Ward's insight and candor even when applied somewhat astringently to Lincoln and politics. It was no accident, apparently, that in 1862 Lincoln insisted upon reading Ward's "High-Handed Outrage at Utica" at a meeting of his cabinet officers prior to reading them the final draft of the Emancipation Proclamation.

Oddly, only rarely in the present-day worlds of academic literary studies and literary journalism does one find more than cursory or derogatory reference to Artemus Ward. It must seem wildly perverse, therefore, for anyone to confess—as I now do—that he has been reading Artemus Ward and other literary humorists of the Civil War period with a good deal of laughter and admiration. After their deaths, such popular humorists generally tend to be forgotten by cultures which are uneasy about the propriety of humor, value the ostensibly serious over the unabashedly comic, and change so rapidly that they forget the artistry and enduring substance of past humor and respond only to humor-incorporating topics and phrases of the immediate moment. These are characteristics of American culture.

But Ward and his fellow humorists also have been singled out for historical oblivion on additional grounds. They are charged with having been popular funny men whose prime comic stock in trade was butchery of the English language by means of gross misspellings and other crude linguistic shenanigans. Furthermore, so traditional literary history puts the matter, these shameless clowns—deprecatingly termed “misspellers”—leaped onto previously dignified lecture platforms and theater stages, turning them into low vaudeville shambles. There, with continued apish gesture and mechanical jokery, these vulgar “phunny phellows” amused audiences who had a great need of instructive discourse and moral uplift, at very least of the kind of respectable, serious humor purveyed by Mark Twain in the East once he outgrew the debasing influences of lower-class childhood in Missouri and young manhood in the Far West.

At the height of his fame in 1906, as though to make atonement for his former association with Artemus Ward and others long derogated not only as misspellers but also as mere “literary comedians,” elderly Mark Twain summed up the quintessential negation of the Civil War humorists. First describing as a “mortuary volume” *Mark Twain's Library of Humor*, a collection of American comic writing he had helped edit in 1888 and in which the misspellers were prominent, Twain went on to explain:

Why have they perished? Because they were merely humorists. Humorists of the “mere” sort cannot survive. Humor is only a fragrance, a decoration.

Often it is merely an odd trick of speech and of spelling, as in the case of Ward and Billings and Nasby . . . and presently the fashion passes and the fame along with it. . . . Humor must not professedly teach, and it must not professedly preach, but it must do both if it would live forever.

Then, perhaps recalling that his career as a nationally distinguished humorist had been generously initiated by Artemus Ward, certainly more aware than anyone of how greatly indebted he was to the manner and substance of the misspellers, Twain added with ironic magnanimity: "By forever, I mean thirty years. With all its preaching [humor] is not likely to outlive so long a term as that."

Twain was as completely wrong about the longevity of his own writings as he was about the essential durability and art of the Civil War humorists. Throughout his life, he remained haunted by a sense of despair induced by the ignominious role assigned to humor by the governing pundits of nineteenth-century American culture. Believing that humor was intrinsically superficial and ephemeral, assigning insufficient weight to its playfulness, thematic range, and imaginative power, they insisted that to merit respect it must be enhanced with ideas and postures reflecting their own conceptions of truth, goodness, and significance. Doubting his deepest, often contrary impulses, poor Twain also doubted the misspellers and anyone else who had independently gone on to write humor. Twain's self-disparagement reminds one of the equally unwarranted self-condemnation expressed by S. J. Perelman, truly a master of modern humor, who has dismissed his works as mere feuilletons, lightweight space fillers in newspapers and magazines.

When Mark Twain asserted that the humor of Artemus Ward, Josh Billings, and Petroleum V. Nasby was "merely an odd trick of speech and of spelling," he was referring to their humorous exploitation of variations from standard grammar, pronunciation, and vocabulary. The humorists were not equally concerned with varying all established linguistic form, meaning, order, and sound, but all managed to misspell. It was this similarity which united them in the minds of some readers and critics as misspellers and, because of its inescapably prominent visibility in their writing, was regarded as the preponderant, if not the sole element of their humor. That it was a crucial misunderstanding becomes clear after a reading of more than several pieces by each of the misspellers. Actually, al-

most all of the misspellers wrote humor in satisfactory standard English before, during, and after the heyday of misspelling in the 1860s. More important, they were distinctively different one from the other, demonstrated a considerable degree of literary sophistication, and taught and exhorted their audiences with commendable substantive seriousness.

Isolated from its context in a literary work, pure misspelling is indeed an elementary literary technique. Its visual incongruity stimulates a reader's amusement, but it requires little more skill from a writer than an ability to rearrange the order of letters in a word and to further complicate the orthographic rearrangement by eliminating some letters and adding new ones. Such rearrangement, though deliberate, is only a little more artistically significant than the misspelling unconsciously perpetrated by a child or adult who, either illiterate or unfamiliar with a language, incorrectly spells out words he may pronounce correctly or be able to recognize in print.

The Civil War misspellers, on the other hand, were prepared and had been encouraged to do more than misspell. Literate and sensitive, in some cases exposed to a few years of higher education and in others self-educated while working as journalists or at other occupations, they were familiar with English and American literature of their own and earlier periods. All were aware that linguistic variation and distortion functioned prominently in the literary humor of great as well as minor writers. Not all may have been as conscious as the Southern journalist George William Bagby of the traditional link between misspelling and dialect when, commenting in 1878 on the style of his popular "Mozis Addums" letters, he said that "never [having] attempted anything in what is called 'Dialect,' but, having a natural turn for bad spelling, [I] thought I would try my hand." Like Bagby, however, the misspellers understood that the range of their humor would be extended by an infusion of the dialectal speech of their neighbors and associates. Along with it would come not merely the vivid phrasing, vocabulary, and imagery of a host of nonwriters, but also their vital accumulation of lore, experience, and perspective not usually tapped by conventionally written literature.

Emphasizing dialect, the misspellers stepped forth in an auda-

cious comic role for which the outstanding precedent was Seba Smith's Jack Downing. Each Civil War misspeller invented a literary mask who spoke wholly in his own unique nonstandard language. Charles Farrar Browne's dialectal mask was Artemus Ward, David Ross Locke's was Petroleum Vesuvius Nasby, Henry Ward Shaw's was Josh Billings, and Charles Henry Smith's was Bill Arp. Shakespeare, Smollett, Thackeray, and Dickens in England and Nathaniel Ward, Hugh Henry Brackenridge, Royall Tyler, Augustus B. Longstreet, William Tappan Thompson, and James Russell Lowell in the United States had already presented comic characters who spoke an incongruously fractured English and were semiliterate, illiterate, or mentally muddled. But these had been surrounded by other characters who spoke English with facility and by authorial statements also in standard English, literary techniques which made readers understand that the author was socially and otherwise superior to dialect speakers. Thus, unlike the Civil War misspellers, these earlier dialect writers escaped the contempt, snobism, or ridicule generated by the traditional association of dialect—as a deviation from standard linguistic norms—with inadequate education, low social status, alien origin, and intellectual deficiency. It was this animus, of course, when softened by philanthropic concern or romantic sentiment, that also aroused complacent amusement at dialect and made it a source of comedy.

The Civil War humorists' determination to express themselves wholly in dialect required them to cope with a special linguistic problem that partial dialect writers had been able to overlook. Only a phonetic alphabet is able to render all the nuances of English speech sounds, whether dialectal or nondialectal. The nonphonetic literary alphabet, which all writers use, can reproduce speech to a limited extent, but only if a writer is willing to engage in misspelling. Literary dialect is essentially a literary convention which merely approximates and suggests true dialect. Large-scale efforts to create phonetically accurate pronunciations with the literary alphabet have resulted in works, like those of the humorist George Washington Harris, which are so overcluttered with strange misspellings, so visually and mentally impenetrable, that most readers' powers of understanding are frustrated and their attention diverted.

To resolve the problem of dialect, accordingly, writers of ~~liter-~~

ary dialect have found it artistically desirable to rely much more upon quasi-phonetic misspellings than upon genuinely phonetic misspellings. This quasi-phonetic misspelling, or eye dialect as it is termed by linguists, represents standard pronunciation rather than dialectal pronunciation. Accordingly, eye dialect effectively serves as a visual signal to the reader of deviation from standard language, yet can be understood without difficulty. Furthermore, any discomfort occasioned by the visual disorder of misspelling can be reduced if works containing eye dialect are kept brief.

The Civil War misspellers displayed sound artistic judgment in depending upon eye dialect as a major stylistic technique. Though there has never been any standard American language, standard regional languages have existed. These hold in common sufficient identical linguistic elements to make interregional communication possible. The brief sketches, letters, and aphorisms of Ward, Nasby, and Billings in the Northern linguistic regions and of Arp in the Southern could thus be widely read and appreciated upon their initial appearance in newspapers and magazines. Their audience continued to increase after reprinting in other journalistic outlets and in subsequent book collections.

The disturbance of language represented by misspelling humor was a tangible and profound expression of the psychosocial shock suffered by the American people during the Civil War. A humorous disordering of language was also stimulated by World Wars I and II. At times like these, humor has an opportunity to be much more openly deviant and controversial, over a broader spectrum of concerns, than more sedate forms of expression. Whether conscious of this or not, the Civil War misspellers took advantage of their fortunate freedom to deviate from sociocultural norms of many kinds by bursting forth into an exuberant and often savage riot that went far beyond misspelling. In this development Artemus Ward was most assiduous and inventive, setting the pace for his contemporaries.

The youthful experience of Ward's creator, Charles Farrar Browne, predisposed him to a career centered on language. He had been born in 1834 in Waterford, Maine, a small agricultural town which his father served in various political offices while earning a living as farmer and land surveyor. Some of Browne's



intellectual independence was probably initiated by his father's liberal Congregationalism and his mother's religious free thought. At his father's death, the thirteen-year-old boy began working as typesetter and printer for newspapers in New Hampshire and Maine. Before long he joined a Boston printing firm which published a humorous journal, *The Carpet-Bag*.

Talented printers in the early nineteenth century frequently turned to journalism. Young Browne easily made this transition. During a short term of newspaper employment in Norway, Maine, he had attended an academy where he wrote pieces for student assemblies and participated in debating and dramatics. But it was from *The Carpet-Bag*, which featured the writings of some of the best humorists of the day, that Browne received his formative literary training. Edited by Benjamin P. Shillaber, famous for the comic malapropisms of his Mrs. Partington character, the magazine opened its pages to all styles and forms of humor, from the amiably amusing and ludicrous to the sharply critical and satirical. Furthermore, it welcomed unknown writers such as Mark Twain, whose first known published piece appeared in 1852, as well as Charles Farrar Browne, who contributed at least eleven items to its pages.

When *The Carpet-Bag* ceased publication early in 1853, Browne wandered west as a journeyman printer, then combined printing and writing for various Ohio newspapers. By 1857, he had become a news reporter and commentator on the local scene for the Cleveland *Plain Dealer*. Browne's rise to fame thereafter was meteoric. His journalistic wit and skill brought him an appointment as associate editor of the *Plain Dealer*. The first of his humorous Artemus Ward letters appeared in 1858 and two years later he gave the first of his comic lectures. Soon Browne was writing regularly for *Vanity Fair*, a New York comic weekly which aimed to be the American version of London's distinguished *Punch*. In 1861 he moved to New York, where he joined the editorial staff of *Vanity Fair*. A year later, in 1862, he became the magazine's managing editor and his first book, *Artemus Ward: His Travels*, was published. It appeared in an initial edition of 40,000 copies, then as now an impressive amount for the first printing of any book and a clue to its publisher's certainty of a large sale. Browne died five years later in England, where he had been contributing

regularly to *Punch* and entertaining great crowds at his lectures. Internationally famous, much quoted and reprinted, he was only thirty-three years old at his death.

Perhaps because Browne died young, he never abandoned the clear, assured, optimistic vision of literary humor he once advanced:

Humorous writers have always done the most toward helping virtue on its pilgrimage, and the truth has found more aid from them than from all the grave polemicists and solid writers that have ever spoken or written. It was always so, and men have borne battle for the right, with its grave truth fully in mind, with an artillery of wit, that has silenced the heavy batteries of formal discussion. They have helped the truth along without encumbering it with themselves. They have put it boldly forward and stood behind it and hurled their fiery javelins at their opponents till they have either fled ingloriously or been entirely silenced. Rabelais—vile fellow as he was and revolting to modern propriety and taste—did immense work for the reform that began contemporaneously with him, and from Rabelais down, the shaft of ridicule has done more than the cloth-yard arrows of solid argument in defending the truth. Those who bolster up error and hate the truth are still men and slow; men with no warm blood, men who hate levity and the ebullitions of wit, who deprecate a joke of any kind, and run mad at a pun. . . . They can fire point-blank charges, but the warfare of flying artillery annoys them. They can't wheel and charge and fire, and the attack in flank and rear by the light troops drives them to cover.

Professionally and personally, Browne was always ready to have some fun. One suspects that in the passage quoted he deliberately parodied the detested turgid rhetoric and platitudinous solemnity which he found to excess in all levels of American speech and writing. Without question, however, the high moral purpose, and the tenacity, intelligence, courage, and vivacity necessary to sustain it, that he ascribed to humor at its best were meant to be self-characterizing.

Extremely versatile and energetic though he was, Browne's comic genius reached its peak in two distinct yet related forms of expression. The first was his guise as the vulgar Artemus Ward, a shrewd, wandering showman who wrote fascinating, semiliterate letters about his adventures. Then there was the second Artemus Ward, a polished, educated gentleman who lectured in fine standard English on subjects of cultural and social importance. Both were humbugs, masters of fraud and hoax, but only the first Ward owned up

to it frankly and discerned it in others. The second Ward, sincere, well-intentioned, and good-natured, revealed himself unintentionally, with apparent unawareness, when the sheer ludicrous incompetence of his platform performance undermined every one of his claims to authority. Neither of the two Wards was a fully individualized character, nor did either appear to have risen from or to be rooted in any precisely delineated cultural history or geographic location. Transcending time and space as it were, both of Browne's alter egos—one a commoner and the other a member of the elite—delivered a comic-caustic panorama unmasking the relation of appearance to reality, of practice to ideals, and of aspiration to possibility in mid-nineteenth-century democratic America.

Browne's carefree bachelor existence—he was for a time a member of a New York bohemian group to which Walt Whitman also belonged—did not hinder him from developing into a conscious artist. The early Artemus Ward letters written during his Cleveland newspaper days, for example, were carefully reviewed prior to collection in book form in 1862. Midwestern names and other localizing details were deleted, thus increasing potential national appeal. Having learned to value economy, Browne combined some letters and condensed others, effectively highlighting the linguistic audacities, absurd situations, and other humorous elements retained. Meticulous discipline also governed the making of his lectures. Apparently spontaneous and haphazard, seemingly marred by forgetfulness, inappropriate pauses, verbal ineptitude, free-association rambling, and other embarrassments, Ward's platform performance was carefully planned and timed. The deadpan earnestness of his effort to communicate, and the chaos that resulted, were so beautifully intermingled that his audience often did not know whether to respond with pity, contempt, or amusement.

An Artemus Ward performance burlesqued the lecturers—philosophers, politicians, ministers, travelers, generals, professors—who had for years zealously traveled about the country, and with serious mien, dispensed wisdom, edification, and inspiration to a population beset by tempestuous political crises and rapid social changes, now engulfed in a Civil War which none of that vast flood of words had foreseen in all its horror nor been able to prevent. A newspaper account of a Ward lecture delivered at Salt Lake City in 1864 aptly

summarized the humorist's critique of high culture and its lecturers. Browne, said the reporter, "revels in the idea that he out-humbugs all humbugs the world ever saw," citing as illustrations of the latter Aristotle, Cicero, and two of Browne's august contemporaries, orator-statesman Edward Everett and philosopher Ralph Waldo Emerson.

All Browne's humor adds up centrally to "an appeal for reason, for balance, for common sense," words that conjure up images of eighteenth-century America and of men like Jefferson who founded the republic. Burlesque lecturer Artemus Ward dramatized the absence of those ideals in the elite of mid-nineteenth-century America. But it is the other Ward, exhibitor of waxwork figures and circus animals, whose blithe letters and sketches portray in detail how abysmally little reason, balance, and common sense Browne discovered in the nation as a whole.

There is something initially inappropriate about having as one's moral and intellectual guide a gross old rogue who boasts at one and the same time of his moral virtue and his lack of principle, who is mercenary, deceptive, opportunistic, and more than a trifle immoderate. Soon, however, his non sequiturs, puns, neologisms, misquotations, clichés, double entendres, wrenched syntax, and dialect have set us to laughing. And then we are impressed by the clarity with which Artemus Ward perceives words, gestures, clothing, people, and objects, the relentlessly literal examination to which he subjects what he perceives, and the bluntness with which he expresses his judgments. At last we understand. Only an amiable, ingratiating dissembler, one blessed with outrageous impudence, gentle spirit, and a scoundrel's insight, could move so freely everywhere, from Lincoln's White House to a Shaker community in upstate New York, and could so brilliantly illuminate the core of truth concealed beneath a misleading surface.

Scarcely an aspect of American life at the mid-nineteenth-century mark escaped Artemus Ward's scrutiny and comment. The results are elating, but painful as well. Ward found duplicity, obsession, greed, egotism, violence, and irrationalism everywhere, in politics, business, reform, and religion, in town and country, in men and women. Despite his joviality, his gibes at political chicanery, war profiteering, draft dodging, and social radicalism were

bitterly resented. Anger was roused most fiercely by his restrained support of the Union cause.

Like many other Northerners, Browne had felt that slavery was an insufficient cause for internecine conflict between North and South; he had even proposed that the Confederacy be permitted to secede. He was slow to exhibit concern for the full human rights of Negroes, though his personal relations with them were warm. His postwar travels in the defeated South, where he fraternized with the former enemy, alienated many Northerners. It appears that he left the United States for England in 1866 not only because the English acclaimed him a great American writer, but also because he had been criticized with righteous severity at home and his professional career seriously damaged.

Our extensive consideration of Charles Farrar Browne and his Artemus Ward has prevented us from exploring other fine American literary humorists who turned to misspelling and related verbal play during the Civil War. As recently as a decade ago, such an approach would have been condemned as irresponsible. It would have been argued that the creators of such lively alter egos as Bill Arp, Petroleum Vesuvius Nasby, and Josh Billings belong in a group with Browne. The underlying assumption would have been that all the misspellers were extremely minor writers and essentially similar, therefore too unimportant to be dealt with separately. However, the criticism and scholarship devoted to the misspellers in the past ten years have destroyed the validity of the assumption in all its parts. The Civil War misspellers were uniquely individual writers. Their misspelling, which mistakenly led to their grouping, varies in each case in accordance with such diversifying factors as the kind and amount of regional dialect each man used. It has been my hope that a revelation of the rich complexity available in one distinguished misspeller will encourage lovers of literary humor to turn with high anticipation to the works of the other misspellers.



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# Mark Twain: *The Height of Humor*

James M. Cox

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Let me begin with a fantasy. Imagine Hal Holbrook coming to a college campus to appear before a packed academic audience who have paid five dollars per person to see his inimitable impersonation of Mark Twain. Imagine a goodly number of deans, professors, seriously cultured adults, and even a college president or two in the audience. Now imagine Holbrook, in a fit of inspiration, bursting naked before the rapt and waiting audience in one wild, brief, wheeling fling across the stage. And then, after such a reenactment of the King's part in the Royal Nonesuch, imagine Holbrook appearing briefly in the role of the Duke to announce that the evening's entertainment was concluded.

Whatever the response of the spectators to such a caper, of one thing we could be sure. Few among the audience would find the event as funny as it is when encountered in Huck Finn's narrative. There, the reader sees the hopeless and ignorant townspeople duped by the two old rascals. And Mark Twain's whole strategy in his masterpiece is to maneuver *his* audience, which is to say his readers; into a position of comfortable self-approval—a position which insulates them from the naked aggressions of the original joke. If that insulation is destroyed, then the very security upon which humor depends is threatened and the humor itself is sharply curtailed. Yet unless such a threat is somehow present, the humor will become more and more safe and the humorist will become more and more predictable. We will know what to expect and

the humorist will correspondingly offer us his routine, his act. The more audience and actor accept such a state of affairs the less our laughter can come from the depths of ourselves in those repeated, rhythmic seizures which shake us to our foundations as they render us literally helpless.

Now what we want—or, more accurately, what we have—in such a state of laughter is an extraordinarily pleasurable release of repressed energy. In order for that release to be pleasurable there must be a measure of safety, a measure of the self-approving insulation which assures us that the joke will somehow inevitably *be* a joke, thus making the expectation of laughter inevitable. But in order for a release to take place at all, there must also be a sense of something escaping, some generative force which either pre-exists the joke or is created by it. Thus, if the humorist becomes too safe, the wildness of incongruity, absurdity, madness, repression are diminished and the energy of humor is reduced. If, on the other hand, the wildness threatens the safety, then anxiety begins to displace security and the pleasure of humor is lost.

Keeping forever within these boundaries requires adroitness enough of the humorist. But there is a further burden. The humorist necessarily occupies a lower position in the hierarchy of aesthetic values. It is no accident that we feel laughter rising from the stomach. Nor is it surprising that those who wish to praise humor are at pains to elevate it from its low estate. Thus discussions of humor, even as they acknowledge the inescapable low laughter of humor, often seek shifty prepositional displacements in an effort to get to the tragedy beneath humor, the vision beyond it, the true joy above it, or, most of all, the seriousness behind it. All these maneuvers, though understandable, are nonetheless evasive efforts to escape the reality of humor—that “low,” “common” form which we know is somehow high and marvelous yet which somehow escapes us the moment we try to “elevate” it into “high” literature.

To be both outrageous and safe, then, and to be forever doomed to “low” literature—these are the burden and the glory of the humorist’s art. And no writer in the English language, unless it was Chaucer at the very beginning, carried the burdens and achieved the glory of humor with more purity and power than



Mark Twain. I say purity because Mark Twain accepted the *identity* of humorist his whole life long. After all, his very name, Mark Twain, was the pseudonym which forever assured his audiences and forever reminded him that he was fatally a humorist. He was, of course, also Samuel Langhorne Clemens, as an assurance that he was a respected and respectable family man, a social man, even a successful author who had lifted himself out of some impoverished past. But he was dominantly Mark Twain. That was his performing name as well as his pen name—and it was as performer and writer that Samuel Clemens prevailed. It was, in brief, as Mark Twain that he prevailed.

As Mark Twain, Samuel Clemens was a humorist, which means that he was in the lower orders of art. He was also an American, which meant in terms of the English language, which, alas, is what Americans speak, that he was also in the lower orders of English literature. Indeed, humor, which, like the novel, represented a "lower" order of imagination, provided an ideal direction for the American imagination to pursue. Conversely, just as the novel and America were rising in power, so was humor. Thus, what had been a term from the old physiology to refer to the bodily fluids which supposedly governed character and personality, had by the eighteenth century come to mean a genial quality of mind. The amiable humorist thus gradually but inevitably became a fixture on the literary scene. By the mid-nineteenth century, humor, though by no means the highest form of consciousness, was nonetheless seen as a distinct value, and humorous literature was providing points of departure for novelists as great as Dickens and Thackeray. Given such a frame of reference, Samuel Clemens was not going against the deeper grain of history by turning toward humorous narrative to express himself.

But Samuel Clemens was no ordinary American; he was a Southern American. He was in fact an out-and-out criminal—the only one of our major writers who was incontrovertibly an outlaw, a fact either forgotten, distorted, or repressed by much literary criticism. For Samuel Clemens first joined the Confederate army, thereby becoming a traitor to his country. After about two weeks as a rebel soldier, he "resigned" from the army, as he ~~was later~~ to refer to his desertion. Thus guilty of the two capital crimes of

treason and desertion, he went west with his brother, Orion Clemens, who, in return for his abolitionist activity, had been appointed Secretary of the Nevada Territory by Lincoln. There in Virginia City, while the Civil War raged in the East, Samuel Clemens, after failing to find silver, discovered Mark Twain and fortune. Yet even as he released himself into humorous narrative, Mark Twain—or was it Samuel Clemens?—continued to be a troublemaker. He left Virginia City for San Francisco because a Southern joke he made connecting the American Sanitary Society (forerunner of the American Red Cross) with miscegenative activity brought him to the verge of a duel with a rival reporter. And he left San Francisco for Tuolumne County, or so he later contended, because his continual journalistic slurs upon the police force put him in jeopardy with the forces of law and order. There in Tuolumne County, in Jim Gillis's cabin on Jackass Hill, Mark Twain heard the tale of the jumping frog which his own great retelling would carry to the distant East. To visit Virginia City today where Samuel Clemens discovered Mark Twain, to look from that ghost town across the desolate landscape of Nevada, and to go to the Jim Gillis cabin in Tuolumne County—which is happily in a worse state of repair than it must have been when Mark Twain was there in 1865—is to be reminded of how deeply Mark Twain is related to *nothing*. To be sure there was a great low tradition of Southwestern humor behind him, which he knew through and through; there was journalistic reporting which he had mastered beyond any author before him; there were the Bible and English literature which he knew better than most academic critics could dream he knew them; there was even the French language, in which young Sam Clemens had kept a notebook when he was seventeen years old, as if in promise of what a great master of language he would eventually be; there were the prior pseudonyms—Thomas Jefferson Snodgrass, Quintus Curtius Snodgrass, W. Epaminondas Adrastus Blab, Sergeant Fathom, and Josh—which Samuel Clemens had tried out in earlier humorous efforts; above all, there was the experience of being a printer, a steamboat pilot on the great Mississippi, a soldier, a miner, and a star reporter.

And yet between the knowledge and experience of Samuel Clemens and the humor of Mark Twain there is a gap, a vacuum,

across which the very current of humor leaps. That vacuum has to do with desolation, nihilism, and the ultimate recognition that behind morals and religion there is nothing in the universe. The glory of humor is to convert that awareness into overt pleasure—to excite God's creatures, as Mark Twain said in an early letter to his brother (already betraying full skepticism that the creatures were God's), to laughter. From that experience and that vacuum, Mark Twain, the very genius of Samuel Clemens began, during the era of Reconstruction following upon the Civil War, his own reconstruction, not of the present but of the past.

It was surely no accident that, once he followed his fame East, he emerged into the foreground of the literary world as the reporter of the first organized pleasure trip from the New World to the Old. As an interloper among the touring pilgrims, he made excruciating efforts to be reverent like them in the halls of art and religion. Yet the very ease with which, in *The Innocents Abroad*, he moved from broad joking to stately reverence, was bound to evoke skepticism in the wary reader. For amid the earnestness and gravity of style and countenance, there was always the old outlaw who had to remind his hearers and readers in one way or another that he was a version of the highwayman—bilking his audience with jokes, luring them with travel narratives, fooling them with outrageous stretchers, and reducing them to helpless laughter.

But there was one joke which Mark Twain could never get out from under—the joke of being a humorist. Helpless before that fatality, he tries to be serious; he wishes he were serious; he earnestly seeks instruction in the art of being serious, and becomes such a master impersonator of seriousness that it is impossible to tell whether he is or is not serious. Yet either his own demonic impulse to humor thwarts and betrays him at the crucial moment of an attempted flight into high literature, or his unappreciative audience, convinced that he is all humor, bursts into a guffaw in the midst of his highest seriousness. Thus if he does not bring himself down, he is brought down. That eternal helplessness is a shadow of the master humorist's power to reduce his audiences to laughter.

even rarer capacity to translate the performance into writing carried Mark Twain forward in his career. The dynamic relation between the two aspects of his personality—between pained moralist and irresponsible humorist, between philosopher and fool, between respectable adult and dreaming child, between experience and innocence—made Mark Twain much more than an amiable humorist. There was always present in him the sensibility of the poet, the scorn of the satirist, and the outrage of the offended moralist. To discharge these pent-up emotions, the humor had to be broad and primitively clear. Mark Twain's transformation of the savagery, the humiliation, and the wrongs of experience as they came across the gap of nothingness into the extended incongruities and digressions of narrative humor gave his style triumphant casualness, epic garrulity, and, above all, masterful clarity.

The triumph of Mark Twain's art is, as everybody knows, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. And the first thing to emphasize about the book is that it is for everyone—for children, for young adults, for the middle-aged, and for the old. And the further we live into its meaning the deeper and more pervasive its humor becomes. Its capacity to meet us throughout our lives makes it a book for everybody, whether educated or uneducated, rich or poor, sophisticated or plain, and reminds us that Mark Twain was, for all his expressed attitudes to the contrary, one of the most democratic writers in the world.

That profound democracy of expression, surely the first and last truth about Mark Twain's humorous genius, brings us irrevocably to the language, the character, and the action of his masterpiece. By letting the "low" vernacular thrust him aside, Mark Twain was able, at the height of his career, to imply conventional language without overtly using it as a frame for dialect. This vernacular or "bad" language is the perfect expression of the action of the book—the story of a "bad" boy doing the "bad" deed of freeing a slave in the Old South. This triply reinforced vision secures the total audience approval which constantly transforms what Huck thinks are bad actions into good ones.

The process of inversion is nothing less than the moral sentiment sustaining the action of the book, and it eventuates in the powerful wish that Huck and Jim be forever free—the very wish that the

closing ten chapters of the novel frustrate. In those chapters, Tom Sawyer, knowing that Jim is already free, returns to stage manage the action of freeing Jim from slavery. Tom's theatricality has brought him forever under moral fire, just as the chapters which Tom dominates have brought Mark Twain under critical fire. Yet if Tom is secretly relying on his knowledge that Jim is legally free, surely every reader is equally relying on *his* knowledge that Jim is free. That security of the moral sentiment makes the reader as safe as, to borrow a line from Mark Twain, a Christian holding four aces. The reader who scapegoats Tom and Mark Twain is usually evading the moment when the novel turned against the moral sentiment.

That moment occurs when Huck utters what everyone knows is his grandest line: "All right then, I'll go to hell." Just there, the moral sentiment drowns Huck in applause and sends him to the heart of heaven. Yet in five minutes of reading time, Huck is in hell all right—the only hell there is in this novel which makes fun of all superstitious hereafters. That hell is none other than adult society. The very accent and rhythm of the line reveal Huck in the act of beginning to play Tom Sawyer, for his positive negation proclaims the fact that he is acting on principle.

That principle is in reality his Northern or inner conscience displacing his Southern or social conscience. His Southern conscience had put him in flight from his society; his Northern conscience welcomes him into ours. And both societies are hell. Why else would we feel so glad that Huck ultimately rejects civilization? His rejection is the radically nihilistic action which his doubly negative grammar and his ignorance of tense distinctions have led him toward. Yet if the book is nihilistic—and surely it is—it is also humorous, and continues to be acted out under the reader's indulgence, affection, and approval.

With Huck's fatal choice, Mark Twain had reached, though he could hardly afford to know how completely he had reached, the limits of his humor: that point at which humor's necessity to gain indulgent and affectionate approval mortally threatened the very identity and character of his humor. Yet even here the form of

in a tight place. Later when Huck lights out for the territory, he leaves civilization not because it is a sham but because it is cramped and smothery. He goes to the West not as an apostle of freedom but as a boy to play. Tom and the adult reader are the ones who have all the principle. This is not all. The ending leaves all adult readers still in the throes of the moral sentiment, if not in approval of the action, in a state of greater self-approval than at any point in the novel—complacently superior to the author's "failure" and obtusely scornful of their own sentimental surrogate, Tom Sawyer. If it is not a perfect ending, it is as good as one can easily imagine for this complete novel of Reconstruction which brought not the Old South but an entirely new South back into the union. In the process the book converted the tragic issue of slavery—the issue which had split the nation apart—into the very sentiment which would so please the mind as to veil the novel's radical disclosure that the adult conscience is the true tyranny of civilization. The book shows that under the sign of the conscience civilized man gains the self-approval to justify the atrocities of adult civilization. And thus man's cruelty is finally his pleasure. That disclosure nakedly seen would be no joke.

It is just that bleak vision which Mark Twain faced for the rest of his life. It was not that he wanted to reform man and do away with conscience; he knew that man could not be reformed. Man would go on killing and maiming his fellow men, always with a serious face, as if the whole business were not really a pleasure. And he would go on mouthing principles and worshipping the Christian God who was enabling the white man to subjugate the savage peoples of the world. Always man would be a slave to the ruthless Moral Sense; always he would lie the old adult lie—the lie by means of which he conceals from himself the truth that cruelty is his deepest pleasure.

The late Mark Twain is full of this vision—so full, I think, that his humor is simplified and weakened. It is true that, when we look at what we have been doing in Asia for the past ten years, Mark Twain's vision may not be so simple-minded as many have thought it. Well before the turn of the twentieth century he could see that white, Christian, capitalistic, technological America which had crushed the agrarian South in the name of freedom could

become involved in its own version of colonialism. *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* raises the spectre of such a venture even as it seems to praise Yankee principles and technology. Less inclined to apologize for civilization than a writer so deep and dark as Conrad, Mark Twain was also less able to assimilate his outrage, scorn, and indignation at the complacency of Western man.

There are those, such as Maxwell Geismar, who thrill to Mark Twain's savagery and feel that the incapacity of academic criticism to deal with this prophetic side of Mark Twain amounts to a kind of implicit censorship. Now there is no question that Mark Twain realized that in the American anti-slavery conscience which emerged into the foreground at the end of the Civil War lay the seeds of economic exploitation, imperial expansion, technological threat, and unconditional surrender, which have characterized much of our twentieth-century foreign policy. Certainly our involvement in and conduct of the Viet Nam war would hold few surprises for the man who wrote "To the Person Sitting in Darkness" or "In Defense of General Funston."

Yet it seems to me that *Huckleberry Finn* will remain the height of Mark Twain's achievement just as it is surely the height of his humor. In that book he discovered in a language as rich as that of any writer we have had—and a language somehow more American than that of any writer we have had—the profound destructiveness of conscience and moral intention. True, he had accepted conscience and civilization as, alas, inevitable. So would Conrad, so would Freud. Mark Twain knew as well as Wordsworth that the boy will grow into the man. For Wordsworth the single adult value that compensates for that great loss is poetry itself; for Mark Twain the value is surely humor.

Anyone who thinks that humor is harmless, or that it is the coward's way out, should remember that *Huckleberry Finn* is the only one of our canonical "great" books that has been subjected to censorship. When it appeared, and was banned by the Concord Public Library, Mark Twain roundly applauded in his confident belief that the action would sell thirty-five thousand copies. Today,

not be accorded such a fate. Who has not laughed at the Concord Public Library's censorship? Yet who is really laughing at our own censorship? Who even wishes to mention the fact? Academic criticism used to be fond of patronizing Mark Twain for his sedulous obedience to the sexual conventions of the nineteenth century. Yet now when we can use all the four-letter words, it turns out that *Huckleberry Finn* is an embarrassment after all. Mark Twain, who always contended that the truth could not be told, would surely see the joke. If we are to have a sense of humor we had better see it too, and see that it is on us, for how can we have a sense of humor unless we can take a joke as well as tell one? Mark Twain knew that, like the dear old King doing the Royal Nonesuch in *Huckleberry Finn*, man was a naked fraud. And yet he also knew that, like Huckleberry Finn, you couldn't help laughing at him. Huckleberry Finn didn't laugh often. It took the most complete and ancient joke to break him up. That was why when he saw the inimitable Royal Nonesuch he observed that it would have made a cow laugh to see the old idiot cavorting up the world's great stage before a completely "sold" audience. And so, the image of a naked King which reduces us to a wail of pain in *King Lear*, finally reduces us to helpless laughter in *Huckleberry Finn*. So reduced, we are at the height of humor.







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# *The Minstrel Mode*

*Blyden Jackson*

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The late James Weldon Johnson, famed Negro author, is among those who remind us that American minstrelsy did have its origin among the slaves of America's Old South. "Every plantation," in Johnson's words, "had its talented band that could crack Negro jokes, and sing and dance to the accompaniment of the banjo and the bones," so that, again in Johnson's words, "when the wealthy plantation-owner wished to entertain and amuse his guests, he needed only to call for his troupe of black minstrels." Yet Johnson's words do not quite do for us what they should. There were wealthy plantations in the Old South, but never as many as it is easy to suppose. For most of the Old South, like most of Old America, was a frontier. Crude virtues flourished in it. Nor did it cater much to social distance. Its black and white bondsmen, its sturdy yeomen, its new proprietors, as well as its riffraff of every color and description, lived in an atmosphere of easy familiarity. It was in their vulgar fellowship, rather than in the ceremonials of an upper class, that the Negro was first truly marked for his role as an American humorist, the role he played in the minstrel mode.

One should not wonder, then, when Constance Rourke, a closer student of the origins of American humor than James Weldon Johnson, expresses interest in the Negro in the South and the "new Southwest" of Old America. At that early time, of course, Alabama

sections of Old America land was still being cleared. Towns were still being founded. The great highways were still the rivers. Negroes sang and danced on those rivers as they toiled on boats or "labored" around the docks or were being carried in coffles from one auction to another. They sang and danced elsewhere, too, in field and village and in the burgeoning raw cities, like Cincinnati, Louisville, Nashville, and Natchez, or, way down near the river's end, New Orleans. From the 1840's and the 1850's Constance Rourke describes a comic trio, the Yankee, the backwoodsman and the Negro. She deposes that the three tended to merge into a single generic figure of which the long-tail'd blue, the costume worn both by Uncle Sam and the blackface minstrel, tended to become, as she points out, a lasting symbol. It was, indeed, as if the Yankee, the backwoodsman, and the Negro were a godsend to people starved not only for the arts of life, but also for the art of living. Each comic figure added a dimension of social nuance, a humanizing influence, to an often otherwise brutelike existence.

This is not to say that there were no plantation minstrels who were black and actually did live on plantations and did perform at a master's whim. Indeed, we still have, hanging in an old mansion in Williamsburg, Virginia, an unsigned painting, dating from around 1790, which shows, as Negro historian of the drama Loftin Mitchell describes it, "a group of Negroes near a cabin, watching a banjo player, a drummer and dancers." The painting is entitled "The Old Plant" and clearly is intended to represent black slaves at leisure on a big plantation. These are clearly also slaves who could, if summoned, heed a master's bidding and entertain his guests. But this painting depicts them near one of their own cabins. It emphasizes their private folk behavior. And thus this painting does imply the true genesis of blackface minstrelsy and the American minstrel mode in a genuine folk figure and folk situation.

All over early America, as America moved westward from the Atlantic Coast to the banks of the Mississippi and from there onward to America's Pacific slope, this dark-skinned folk figure was much in evidence. It was not only that he was ubiquitous. He was also, even in a society that called itself democratic and prided, even preened, itself on its egalitarianism, somehow separate.

As he was unique, so was his situation. And, since he was so separate, he could be watched almost as if he were a trophy under glass. Moreover, a certain fascination did attach to watching him. He did have his gifts and his traits, his fiddling, his banjo playing, his tambourine and bones, his melodies, his fables, his tall tales, his dancing that blackface minstrelsy would later characterize as heelology, his general style of life. Constance Rourke quotes a traveler of 1795. "The blacks," said this traveler, "are the great humorists of the nation." They were, indeed, great humorists, and in their humor they were often real, or incipient, minstrels.

The second element in the minstrel mode that requires consideration is impersonation. Apparently the first impersonation of a Negro on an American stage occurred in 1769, before America became a nation, when an English actor, one Lewis Hallam, in the Englishman Isaac Bickerstaff's comic opera, *The Padlock*, played a drunken Negro on a New York stage. A real Negro, it seems, played the role of Sambo in Murdoch's drama, *Triumph of Love*, at the Chestnut Street Theatre in Philadelphia in 1795. Four years later white Gottlieb Graupner, born in Hanover, Germany, and a claimant to the distinction of being the "father of American orchestral music," at the Federal Theater in Boston, to close the second act of a play, sang a song, "The Negro Boy." He was encored repeatedly. Other stage personalities, almost all of them white, in the early years of the nineteenth century, did Negro bits of one kind or another. But probably the first impersonation of the Negro which led directly to blackface minstrelsy must be credited to a young white man named Thomas Dartmouth Rice.

Rice was born in 1808 in New York City. (Few star blackface impersonators were not born in the North.) Trained to be a wood carver, Rice soon gravitated toward the one vocational world in which he had a permanent interest, the world of the theater. The end of his 'teens found him working the towns of what was then the American West. A sort of theatrical handyman, he served as a stage carpenter, a lamplighter, and an actor in supernumerary roles. Either in Cincinnati or, more probably, Louisville his path crossed that of a Negro hostler with a hunched-up right shoulder and a rheumatic left leg, stiff at the knee. From this Negro Rice borrowed both the curious dance of a man ~~handicapped~~

by an infirmity, yet still adroit of movement, and the famous chorus, to which a rash of verses would eventually be improvised:

First on de heel tap, den on de toe,  
Ebery time I wheel about I jump Jim Crow.  
Wheel about and turn about and do jis so,  
And every time I wheel about I jump Jim Crow.

So it was that Thomas Dartmouth Rice, in blackface, became "Jim Crow," or "Daddy" Rice, and for the better part of twenty years, although he was to die paralytic and impoverished, the sensation of America and England. Late in 1832 he "jumped Jim Crow" at the Bowery Theatre in New York City. His ecstatic audience recalled him twenty times. In Washington he is said to have brought the four-year-old Joseph Jefferson, who would grow up to become one of the eminent actors of the century, on to the stage with him, in blackface and a large sack, to plump the tiny tot out, and then to come down toward the footlights, singing:

Ladies and Gentlemen, I'd have you for to know  
That I've got a little darkey here that jumps Jim Crow.

In 1836 he took London by storm. Later, he was altogether as enormous a hit in Dublin. Perhaps no individual ever matched him as a "single" in Negro impersonation. And Rice, upon occasion, did appear in true blackface minstrel shows. Even so, however, the honor of initiating the true blackface minstrel show is usually accorded to Dan Emmett, composer of the well-known song "Dixie," and to three other white men, "Billy" Whitlock, banjoist, Frank Bower, expert on the bone castanets, and "Dick" Pelham, owner of a tambourine. Either late in 1842 or early in 1843, as the Virginia Minstrels, this quartet played in New York City the performance out of which the minstrel show was born.

Blackface minstrelsy, as a form of organized theater, lasted a long time. Not until 1928 did the Al G. Field company, the final survivor of hundreds of minstrel troupes, ring down the curtain that rang out the end of professional minstrel shows. It may be difficult now, in the days of technological theater, to realize how

successful the living theater of blackface minstrelsy once was. In the years of their prime—which would be at their very peak in the 1850's and the 1860's—the minstrel shows waxed truly like a green bay tree. They virtually took over as their particular bonanza the big towns, where they for years monopolized the best houses. One company, Bryant's Minstrels, actually played, except for an interruption of nine months in San Francisco, continuously in New York for sixteen years, nine of those years at one spot, Mechanics Hall. Nor was this company by any means the only minstrel group to stay in one town or one theater for a run of an astounding length. Moreover, there was a time when the minstrel companies, merely in trying to accede to an authentic popular demand, gave, and were long forced to continue to give, three performances a day. They could be found, too, in small towns, in villages and every hinterland. They played on the East Coast, on the West Coast, in middle America, North and South, overseas in Europe, as far afield as Hawaii and Australia, and we have at least one account of a band of Hindi minstrels playing and singing in blackface in nineteenth-century India. The minstrel show, it is true, did begin as an impersonation of the Southern Negro. But it acquired, in addition, a set form. It had a first part, a second part, and, sometimes, even, a third part. It was in the first part that the performers sat, on stage, in a semicircle with the interlocutor, who played it white and straight, in the middle, and Mr. Tambo and Mr. Bones, with their proper instruments, at either end. The first part ended with a walk-around and hoe-down. The second part was called the olio and was really a variety show in which a medley of acts was presented. It was especially in the olio, which tended to absorb the occasional third part, that the connection of the minstrel show with black impersonation first grew thin and often finally in essence disappeared. The legitimate aspirations of blackface minstrelsy may be said to have resided in the impersonation of the Negro and the burlesquing of his character. The burlesquing was important and as legitimate as the impersonation. But the exhibition of virtuosity, any virtuosity,

From their earliest days, for obvious reasons, the minstrel shows had indulged themselves in street parades. Those parades grew larger and larger, fancier and fancier, gaudier and gaudier. So, too, and not only in the olio, did the companies. By 1880 Haverly's Mastodons carried a hundred members, with elaborate stage settings, through America into England, and beyond. But then another company appeared with, of course, one hundred and ten members, including "two bands of fourteen musicians each, a sextette of saxophone players, two drum corps of eight each, two drum majors and a quartette of mounted buglers." Meanwhile, Haverly's Mastodons by the time they arrived, in 1884, at the Drury Lane Theatre in London had expanded to eighteen end men with the traditional tambourines and bones and an additional half-dozen star end men who were presented to the audience in relays. And by this date, and later, one might well expect to see in black-face minstrelsy, for they had all appeared there with, indeed, increasing regularity, bicycle riders, club and hoop manipulators, yodelers, expert whistlers, acrobats, jugglers, contortionists, Chang, the Chinese giant, and other sideshow freaks, arias and episodes from opera, given straight or otherwise, a travesty on Sarah Bernhardt known as Sarah Heartburn, animal acts, drill teams, bird and animal imitators, pantomimists and whole plays, sometimes as farces, but (alas!) sometimes as serious attempts at serious art. As early, indeed, as 1845, Monsieur Cassimir, "the Great French Drummer," had regaled New Orleanians with an imitation on his drum of a whole battle in the Mexican war, including not only the firing of small arms and cannon, but all of the other sounds of the contending armies. As late as 1928, moreover, Al G. Field's company enacted its first part before a skyscraper background in a roof-garden setting. Not even the witty could excuse such a tableau as a cotton field in the clouds. For gradually and monumentally from blackface minstrelsy the Negro and the Negro's true agrarian world had been expunged. The humor had gone with them. The shows had been converted into extravaganzas, little, if any, different from expensive vaudeville. Once the minstrel songs had been Negro songs dealing with Negro figures: Jim Crow, Zip Coon, Dan Tucker. But, through the years, Dan Tucker had turned white. Zip Coon had sunk into oblivion beneath "Turkey in the Straw." And what was left of both had suffered the same fate as



what was left of Jim Crow. It had surrendered to the version of the Negro which had come to constitute the third large element in the minstrel mode.

There was, it is certainly true, never a time, even in early Jamestown, when white Americans did not harbor some special feelings toward people who were black. Thomas Jefferson, for example, is not infrequently cited for his philosophic opposition to slavery. And there can be little doubt but that when Jefferson spoke of freedom for all he meant exactly what he said. Nevertheless, extending justice to Negroes did not also mean to Jefferson the identification of Negroes with Anglo-Saxons. White people, thought Jefferson, were more beautiful than black, more elegantly symmetrical of form. The blacks, however, seemed to him to require less sleep. They were wanting in forethought and much inferior in reason and in imagination. The love of blacks, moreover, in Jefferson's view, was "more an eager desire, than a delicate mixture of sentiment and sensation," and Negroes, as he saw them, could not grieve long, nor really be expected to reflect. Apostle of the Enlightenment that Jefferson was, he does, even so, seem conditioned to do his thinking about Negroes along racistic lines. It is hardly probable, therefore, that the first whites who impersonated Negroes were not at least a little racistic, too. Nevertheless, the animus against Negroes, within America does seem to bear some correlation to the imperial spirit of the Plantation South. The more cotton the South grew, both before and after the Civil War, the more it insisted upon an image of the Negro that would fit the Negro for the place in a Plantocracy where he belonged. Matters were not quite that simple all over America. But they were almost. The pressure of color caste affected not only Negroes. It affected also their representation. And nowhere was their representation a readier tool for racism than in blackface minstrelsy. The little darkey that jumped Jim Crow became every Negro—every Negro in real life as well as on the stage.

And so the minstrel mode, in its worst element, invaded American life, in the very process reversing a relationship, so that, instead of life dictating to art, art dictated to life. By the days be-

in the minstrel mode had become, on stage or off, a prescribed cult. It had conquered and, outlasting blackface minstrelsy as such, had put the stamp of its own minstrel mode on virtually every approach of average Americans to Negroes and Negro life.

It could not last and has not. Negroes themselves, using their own accesses to the minstrel mode, long ago began to undermine it. One has but to turn back forty years to the character of Jimboy, Negro vagrant in Langston Hughes' novel, *Not Without Laughter*, to suspect that Negro artists have been deliberately contemptuous of the old orthodoxies in the conventional American minstrel mode. Jimboy himself is a minstrel, a black wanderer who prowls America in search of a decent job, his guitar as his traveling companion, and he sings the blues. W. C. Handy, emerging out of rural Alabama, was to become, after his real life in Memphis and his real pilgrimage to New York, the recognized "Father of the Blues." Both the real W. C. Handy and the unreal Jimboy speak to us of what Charles Keil has called, in his book, *Urban Blues*, "an expressive male role within urban lower-class Negro culture—that of the contemporary bluesman." Thus, when Ralph Ellison, in *Invisible Man*, has Tod Clifton "drop out of history"—that is, cease to be his true black self—and so permits Clifton to peddle Sambo, a dancing doll manipulated as a puppet, to street crowds in downtown, white Manhattan, the episode constitutes a perfect metaphor for the racism in the minstrel mode of blackface minstrelsy. Jimboy and W. C. Handy are, on the other hand, while not perfect metaphors for a countermovement to this racism, at least important signposts. For undoubtedly in very actual life the Negro who was once in America's rural South has migrated to the city like, incidentally, both Handy and Jimboy. Undoubtedly, moreover, that Negro has created his own sense of himself. Undoubtedly, finally, he has found, and deputized, his own interpreter of this sense, and that interpreter—Ray Charles, B. B. King, and other artists of their kind and tone—is a bluesman, a black minstrel made by blacks, and, indeed, the latest strain in an American minstrel mode that was always Negro in its origins and largely Negro in its context but now at last bids fair, with jazzmen and the blues, against the background of an urban scene, to be more Negroid in its creative soul.





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# Comedy and Reality in Local Color Fiction, 1865–1900

Arlin Turner

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In an introduction to a collection of *The World's Wit and Humor* (1904), Joel Chandler Harris wrote:

There seems never to have been a day in our history when the American view of things generally was not charged or trimmed with humor. . . . In the light of his own humor, the American stands forth as the conqueror of circumstance, who has created for himself the most appalling responsibilities, which he undertakes and carries out with a wink and a nod, whistling a hymn or a ragtime tune, to show that he is neither weary nor downhearted.

The creator of Uncle Remus could speak with authority of his own about American humor, and he might have quoted other authorities from early in the previous century. He could have mentioned an essay in the *Democratic Review* for September, 1845, when the humor of Hawthorne and Poe and Simms was discussed; or an essay on a later generation of humorists in *Harper's Magazine* for April, 1890, or an article entitled "A Century of American Humor" in *Munsey's Magazine* for July, 1901; or one by William Peterfield Trent entitled "A Retrospect of American Humor," published in the *Century Magazine* for November, 1901. Looking back over the preceding century, Trent characterized the humor that he thought distinctly American:

It is, on the whole, a broad humor that frequently does not disdain the aid of bad spelling and bad puns. It deals in incongruities of expression; it accentuates oddities; it sets the commonplace in ridiculous relief; it bur-

lesques pretensions; it laughs at domestic, social, and political mishaps, when they are not too serious; it makes game of foibles and minor vices, it delights to shock the prim, but sedulously avoids all real grossness, it sometimes approximates sheer though innocuous mendacity.

Across the ocean, Thomas Carlyle had spoken in 1840 of a "broad Brobdignag grin of true humor" such as might be caught "out of the American backwoods." Others in England besides Carlyle had read examples of frontier humor reprinted in *Bentley's Magazine* and in an anthology entitled *Traits of American Humor*, in which Judge T. C. Haliburton, creator of Sam Slick, had characterized three regions of American humor: that of the middle states, like the English, "at once manly and hearty, and though embellished by fancy, not exaggerated"; that of the West, like the Irish, "extravagant, reckless, rollicking, and kind hearted"; and that of the Yankees, like the Scottish, "sly, cold, quaint, practical, sarcastic."

It was the humor of the West, Carlyle's "broad Brobdignag grin of true humor," that received most attention, though often uncomfortable attention on both sides of the Atlantic. This was the humor that William Gilmore Simms, reflecting his kinship with the great Elizabethans he so warmly admired, found ideal reading for the steamboat or the railway car. Simms added, in deference to the formal literary tastes of Charleston, that such humorous books would of course not be brought into the house when the traveler reached home. This was the humor that the *North American Review* lamented in the same voice it lamented the common schools; "Common Schools make us a nation of readers. But common schools, alas! do little to inculcate taste or discrimination in the choice of reading. The mass of the community has a coarse digestion. . . . It likes horse-laughs." When Nathaniel Hawthorne visited Washington in 1862, he wrote in an essay for the *Atlantic Monthly* about the "delectable stories" for which President Lincoln was "so celebrated." "A good many of them are afloat upon the common talk of Washington," he remarked, "and certainly are the aptest, pithiest, and funniest little things imaginable; though, to be sure, they smack of the frontier freedom, and would not always bear repetition in the drawing-room, or on the immaculate pages of the Atlantic." Even this reference to the Lincoln stories was struck from

the copy that went into the *Atlantic Monthly*; it is preserved because it was restored to the essay later, along with the remainder of Hawthorne's sketch of Lincoln.

During the 1840's and 1850's this earthy, extravagant humor appeared in the escapades of Henry Clay Lewis's Louisiana Swamp Doctor, Johnson Jones Hooper's Simon Suggs, and George Washington Harris's Sut Lovingood. These characters had descendants a generation later in David Ross Locke's Petroleum Vesuvius Nasby, for example, and Mark Twain's King and Duke in *Huckleberry Finn*. But such crude, raucous characters had been relegated all along to subliterary writings, and in the decades following the Civil War were hardly more acceptable in polite letters. Since the 1840's, the less abrasive comedy of Irving, Hawthorne, Lowell, Holmes, and Simms had been discussed in the magazines and had appeared in anthologies of American humor. It was such a genial fireside humor that prevailed in the second half of the nineteenth century and especially set the tone of the local color fiction of the time.

The antebellum humor—no less in A. B. Longstreet's rural Georgia than in Seba Smith's Downingville, Down East in Maine—had a strong ingredient of the local. After the war, soldiers from New England who had served in New Orleans, or soldiers from Alabama who had served in Pennsylvania or had been imprisoned in Ohio—or the families of soldiers—were primed to read about regions and peoples they had never known existed before the war. Publishers, editors, and authors kept these readers in mind. They kept in mind also the goal of reuniting the divided country and consequently strove to encourage understanding and sympathy. Suffering and bitterness remained, to be sure; Jefferson Davis, Albert Taylor Bledsoe, and others continued to debate the issues and the events of the war. But the fiction writers seemed ready to consider the hostilities closed and to distribute loyalty and bravery and generosity among both Yankees and Confederates. As a rule the local colorists dealt not with generals and politicians, but with the common folk, who were most appealing when they were most isolated in their remote communities. Hence the plots were likely to turn on elemental, if not primitive, considerations; and a story set in a remote section among distinctive people might be especially

attractive—and most attractive, Bret Harte was to discover, when the characters thought and acted at the level of commonplace, homely morality.

In the decades after the Civil War, the stream of humor from the prewar years took two courses, producing in the one comedy independent of place and in the other exploitation of the local. Artemus Ward, Petroleum Vesuvius Nasby, and others aimed at a wide audience through national magazines and newspaper columns and the lecture platform. Without the local context in which the earlier humorous characters had existed—James Russell Lowell's Hosea Biglow, *Down East*, for example, or Johnson Jones Hooper's Simon Suggs, in Alabama—these humorists turned to national topics, mainly political, and developed a battery of humorous devices that had little kinship with real characters or actual speech. Artemus Ward's trickery of language and spelling was appropriate to his antics among the Mormons or his visit to the Tower of London. He followed his own prescription for a new school of humorists: "Let them seek to embody the wit and humor of all parts of the country. . . . Let them form a nucleus which will draw to itself all the waggery and wit of America."

But the comedy that had been recognized at least since 1830 as native American had not been simply waggery and wit. It had displayed the rich variety, "the incongruities of the new world," in the words of F. L. Pattee in 1915—"the picturesque gathering of peoples like the Puritans, the Indians, the cavaliers, the Dutch, the negroes and the later immigrants; the makeshifts of the frontier, the vastness and the richness of the land, the leveling effects of democracy, the freedom of life, and the independence of spirit." The low characters and the horselaughs that earlier had been banished from polite letters had begun to gain status at the middle of the century from the books and the platform readings of Charles Dickens. In keeping with the mood of reconciliation fostered in the postwar literature, moreover, the characters were drawn with greater humanity and greater sympathy. The peculiar, the odd, the unexpected continued to be exploited for comic effect, but there was a changed tone, deriving in part from a Dickensian view of human nature and in part from a greater awareness and tolerance of local particularities.



The writers acknowledged an obligation to record local scenes, characters, and manners with accuracy befitting social historians. Writing in an era of literary realism, in varying degrees they sought to augment the literal truthfulness of their stories and novels by close attention to actuality and exactness of details. They had in mind readers they assumed to be eager to know the characters being described, in their particular local setting and in all aspects of their lives. William Dean Howells noted in 1872 the vogue of fiction portraying the diverse regions of the country and added, "Gradually, but pretty surely, the whole varied field of American life is coming into view in American fiction." Joel Chandler Harris more than once urged the importance of the local in literature. In an editorial for the *Atlanta Constitution* of January 25, 1880, not long before the first collection of his Uncle Remus stories appeared, he declared that "no enduring work of the imagination has ever been produced save by a mind in which the provincial instinct was the controlling influence." Later, in the *Chicago Current*, he offered American authors further limitations: "I think, moreover, that no novel or story can be genuinely American, unless it deals with the *common people*, that is, the *country people*."

Dialect became for these purveyors of the local an important aid to individual characterization and to the portrayal of communities. Irving, Poe, Hawthorne, and Melville made little use of dialect speech. Any attempt on their pages to indicate that a Negro or an Indian or an Irishman or a Dutchman had a distinctive speech was likely to be casual and to suggest whim on the part of the author rather than care. The humorists of the same period saw more need to give their characters appropriate speech; but most of them showed little concern for either accuracy or completeness in representing the dialect. James Russell Lowell and George Washington Harris were two notable exceptions. Lowell was a careful student of New England speech, as he made clear in his introduction to the Second Series of *The Biglow Papers*, and was equally careful in representing that speech in his satiric portraits. Harris had an acute ear for the language spoken in the mountains of eastern Tennessee, and he took such pains to record the speech of his illiterate mountaineer, Sut Lovingood, that he produced some of the most forbidding dialect recorded in our literature.

When George W. Cable began in the early 1870's writing the stories of Creole New Orleans that appeared in *Scribner's Monthly* and were collected in 1879 in the volume *Old Creole Days*, he carried his reverence for accuracy over into his recording of local speech. He knew French as a second native language, and he mastered the various levels of Creole patois that mingled on the *banquettes*, the sidewalks, of the old city. He had ample testimony from his friends Mark Twain and Howells and those who wrote him from the offices of his New York publishers that the speech of his Creole characters fascinated them. They spoke nothing but Creole, they wrote him, and they inserted Creole phrases in their letters. Mark Twain liked to read aloud the speech of the ancient Creole, the title character in the story "Jean-ah Poquelin." Howells took special delight in the Creole mother and daughter in Cable's first novel, *The Grandissimes*, as did also the Scottish author James M. Barrie.

From the outset, however, the difficulties inherent in the dialect were apparent. Edward King, who had heard Cable read his own stories aloud in New Orleans, secured the acceptance of the first story for *Scribner's Monthly* by reading it to the editor and thus reducing the obstacle of the written dialect. More than one of Cable's friends, reading his early stories, thought he lost narrative effectiveness in his pursuit of literal accuracy in all respects, including the dialect. In attempting to show the French Creole's pronunciation of the long vowel *a* and the consonant *r*, to cite the most bothersome instances, he laid a burden on his readers that brought protests from them—and from his editors in turn. His response was to reduce the dialect in later stories and in reprinting his first novel, *The Grandissimes*, in 1883, three years after its first publication, to simplify the speech of the Creole characters. He had comparable difficulties with the speech of a Negro from the remote backwoods, the Italian, the German, and especially the Irish segments of the New Orleans population who appeared in his fiction. With more experience, he learned to rely less on full transcription of dialect and more on occasional words, phrases, pronunciations, and locutions to suggest rather than delineate the dialect being spoken.

The literary use of dialect had been complicated by the misspellers, such as Artemus Ward, who admitted any degree of trickery and stunting in language for comic effects. Before writing his first

story, Cable had decided against misspelling and had been pleased that Mark Twain had reached the same conclusion. While the literary comedians, as they are plausibly called, continued to manipulate language as itself the material of comedy, the fiction writers who gave first allegiance to the real and the local sought means of representing dialect speech as accurately and fully as possible without sacrificing readability. Grace King and Kate Chopin, chief among those who followed Cable in writing about the French of Louisiana, could profit directly from his experimentation. One of the earliest to delineate the plantation Negroes was Irwin Russell, who knew them from boyhood in Port Gibson, Mississippi, and had been reproducing their speech, in both verse and prose, several years before he died in 1879 at the age of twenty-six. Joel Chandler Harris and Thomas Nelson Page praised without reserve the work Russell had done in fields they cultivated later, saying that he "woke the first echo" and that if he had lived, they "would have taken back seats." To the novice in reading it, the speech of Harris's Uncle Remus is difficult, but the simplicity of the tales and the recurrence of a relatively few expressions enable the reader to gain a feeling for the dialect and some facility in reading it in a surprisingly short time. Apparently Thomas Nelson Page's first story, "Marse Chan," was held out of print by the editor of the *Century Magazine* four years after its acceptance for fear the readers would rebel against a story written entirely in the dialect of a plantation Negro.

Among the dialects of the local colorists, none created such difficulties for the readers as the dialects of the French in Louisiana and the ex-slaves of the South. The rural and small-town New Englanders of Harriet Beecher Stowe and Sarah Orne Jewett speak a dialect greatly leveled out from that of Lowell's Hosea Biglow. The Pike dialect that Bret Harte knew in the West and Mark Twain used as early as "The Jumping Frog of Calaveras County" was less a dialect than an illiterate modification of commonplace speech. There has been no tendency to challenge Mark Twain's statement that *Huckleberry Finn* contains "the Missouri negro dialect; the extremest form of the backwoods Southwestern dialect; the ordinary 'Pike County' dialect; and four modified varieties of this last"; nor his further statement that he possessed "personal familiarity with these several forms of speech." Recognizing speech

to be an important indicator of character, whether actual or fictional, Mark Twain wanted to gain in his own fictional writings all he could from this aid to character delineation. And like the others writing tales and novels depicting distinctive peoples in singular localities, he realized the contribution that dialect would make all along the spectrum of humor, from genial comedy to extravagant buffoonery.

As is true of all humorous portraits, the comic effects achieved in local color fiction depend heavily on the relation of the author to his characters, that is, to the subjects he undertakes to picture in their special localities. We are accustomed to saying of Irwin Russell that he knew from close observation the plantation Negroes whose speech and songs and beliefs he recorded in his poems, of Joel Chandler Harris that on the middle Georgia plantation where he lived from the age of twelve he knew models for his fictional characters; of Kate Chopin that while she lived in Natchitoches, Louisiana, she knew the Cajuns she afterward portrayed, for example, in the stories collected in *Bayou Folk*; of Sarah Orne Jewett that on trips with her father, a physician, to visit his rural patients she observed such people as appear in her works; of Mary Noailles Murfree that she went with her family to spend each summer in the mountain region she recreates in her novels and stories. The most we can say of Bret Harte is that he visited the mining camps he portrayed.

It cannot be said that these and others of the local colorists belong to the people they write about. They are in varying degrees outsiders assembling materials for literary use and writing mainly for readers who know nothing of the regions and peoples being presented. That is to say that the laughing in local color fiction is normally *at* rather than *with* the characters. The distinctive peoples who appear in this fiction have rarely been among its readers. When they have been (as were some of the New Orleans Creoles reading Cable's stories), they have been as a rule less than pleased with the fictional portraits of themselves and their ancestors. Understandably they have been most critical of the comedy the authors find in their speech, manners, and other personal traits. But the essential nature of local color writing is involved here, and it would not be easy to argue that the only legitimate portrait is a self-portrait.





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# *Rural Humor of the Late Nineteenth Century*

*C. Carroll Hollis*

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When all of the information on book and magazine publishing, lecture tours, newspaper columns, and bar and barbershop gossip is put on computers, it will be apparent that in the last quarter of the nineteenth century the form of cultural communication of greatest popularity was humor. More people read or listened to humorists than to historical romancers, oral or printed sermons, sentimental tales, western stories, drama, domestic novels, local color stories, or Horatio Alger's dime novels. But why this great attention to laughter? And what has happened to the humorists who answered so abundantly the nation's need for laughter?

It is not my task to answer these questions completely, for I wish to speak only of rural humor, which is but a part, if the largest part, of the humor of the period. But what we find out about the rural humor will provide a good part of the larger answer to the role of humor in American life. From the end of the Civil War to the beginning of the Spanish American War in 1898, American life was outwardly peaceful, not even the Indian skirmishes being of sufficient significance to give a name to the period. But if outwardly peaceful in the sense that drafts, military economy, and war patriotism did not dominate the country's attention, it was nevertheless a time of seething social change.

Note the different tags social and cultural historians use to focus on some part or other of this period. The Age of Inventions, often known as the age of the tinkerers, when there were more patents

than for any period before or since, when Bell, Edison, Ford, the Wright brothers were perfecting the experiments that were to change the life of the new century so drastically. The Bible Belt, a term relating to fundamentalism in religion, with the great popular revivalists Moody and Sankey, the choir practice, the ladies' aid societies, with the concomitant opposition of the town atheist, Bob Ingersoll, and apologists for Darwin. The Age of Expansion, with the final settling of the West, the *laissez faire* economics, the cattle baron and the cowboy, the expanding railroads and expanding railroad scandals. The Genteel Tradition, with its "ideality" of the arts, the overprotection of women from the realities of life, Comstock and the Watch and Ward Society, the heyday of the historical romance with *Ben Hur*, *When Knighthood Was in Flower*, and *To Have and to Hold*, the sentimental falsification of childhood in *Little Women*, *Little Lord Fauntleroy*, and *Little Shepherd of Kingdom Come*. The Gilded Age, of Mark Twain's novel of the speculative instinct at work, but with its new moneyed aristocracy, the excessive display of excessive wealth, the Gibson girl fashions, the spectacular rise and fall of great fortunes. The Melting Pot Mistake, with the sudden influx of those from Eastern or Southern Europe with strange (therefore un-American) customs, names, religious practices, the Yellow Peril in the Far West, the Scandinavians in the farm states, the Irish on the railroads, the Jews in the cities, the Poles in the coal mines. The Muckrakers, with their exposé of the big city bosses, the patent medicine racket, the Standard Oil monopoly, the Wall Street swindlers, the beef trust. The New South, with its corresponding Tragic Era for blacks, the KKK, the carpetbagger, the poor white, the Lost Cause syndrome. The Robber Barons, with Rockefellers, Carnegies, Goulds, and Morgans, and their opposition in the Molly Maguires, the Knights of Labor, Eugene Debs, and the Haymarket Riot. And finally the Rise of the City, with its new industrialism, the sweat shops, the tenements, the skyscraper.

Of these various elements of American social life, it is only this last that needs further explanation for the understanding of rural humor, but it should be remembered that practically every item in the above paragraph becomes the subject for the humor of the period. But as to the rise of the city it is important to remember



that only in 1900 had America ceased to be predominantly an agricultural and rural nation. And even in those final decades of the century the bulk of the native-born residents of the booming cities had come from farms or little towns. Consequently rural humor is the basis of native American humor from the very beginning with the *Farmers' Almanacs* to Will Rogers. The great substratum of American rural humor is so broad in fact that much of it has remained at the folk level, anonymous, pervasive, and indigenous to its region (Yankee or Down-East humor, the Old Southwest, the tall tale of the frontier, the gold rush humor of the Far West). What has happened is that those who have capitalized on or who have otherwise exploited, rural humor have enormous resources in the society about them. The rural humorists in the last part of the nineteenth century had little more to do than to focus an inherited attitude and technique on some one or more of the new inventions, fads, changes, scandals, or developments in the fast-moving national evolution.

Accordingly, there is a vast anonymity in this humor. It was not that these writers imitated each other but they all imitated—or, better, mirrored and reflected—a common native attitude. If one removes such identifying features as place names, characters' names, and dialect, it would be almost impossible to reassemble a mixed-up table of contents for any of the numerous anthologies of American humor published in this period. One could identify regional humorists, to be sure, and also Marietta Holley, Harriet Spofford, and Frances Whitcher from the twenty or so men who sold as widely, but within these groups the distinctions are minimal.

If we limit the group of rural humorists between 1875 and 1900 to those whose sales were over 500,000 there are still twenty-five or so, and it would be futile for the purposes of this series to talk about each of them. Rather I wish to consider them as a group, identifying only those works as are cited, and treating their humorous efforts in terms of their common attitudes, technique, audience, subject matter, and permanent contribution. Many humorists who adopted the misspelling devices for extra comic effect were also rural humorists (Artemus Ward, Josh Billings, Petroleum Vesuvius Nasby, Orpheus C. Kerr), but they are receiving separate treatment elsewhere in this series and so will be omitted here. Similarly,

Mark Twain and Joel Chandler Harris share many of the characteristics of rural humor, but here too their separate treatment precludes consideration in this discussion.

Other commentators in this series will have sufficiently defined humor so that we need here only to direct our attention to the group of writers who spoke from a realistic country background, using the humorous devices of exaggeration, malapropisms, euphemism, misquotation, mixed metaphor, anticlimax, and understatement, to an audience composed of rural, village, or small-town people, or if in the city those of rural background and conviction. Their subject matter varies as widely as the list of characteristics of the period mentioned at the beginning of this discussion. Indeed, one way of knowing the key elements in this or any other period in American life is to notice what the humorists pick to laugh at or ridicule. After considering these common attitudes, audiences, and subjects treated, I would like to assess the contribution of the humorists and to indicate what has happened to them in literary history, for they have all long since vanished from our libraries and standard reading lists.

The humorist who does no more than tell a joke does not have a sufficiently involved and committed concern with his subject or his audience to be remembered at all. One of the crushing disappointments to any young reader is to go from one anecdote to another, page after page, in *Joe Miller's Joke Book* or any similar collection, looking for the uproarious, witty, clever, subtle, or broad story that will tickle the funny bone or bring the shout of laughter. To the reflective student this may be a useful disappointment, for he soon realizes that the humor of the skeleton joke is more in the teller than the words, in the oral and not the printed rendition. What then is needed is something more than the gag, the absurd situation, the unexpected reversal, the clever pun, the heights or depths of human folly, or to say this another way, these must be presented in a form that brings out the humorous significance to the reader.

One way of doing so was to establish a *persona*, a country or small-town character through whom the humor was presented. Not all, but many of the rural humorists did adopt this approach. So,

Marietta Holley is long forgotten in her own name but as Samantha, Josiah Allen's wife, became a household word for her homely kitchen philosophizing about men and manners in ubiquitous Jonesville. New Hampshire lawyer and later judge, Henry Augustus Shute, became Plupy, a young rural adolescent, so he could tell of the hilarious adventures of his friends Beany and Pewt in *The Real Diary of a Real Boy*. Charles Heber Clark, who came from the Maryland countryside to be a Philadelphia newspaper reporter, adopted the name Max Adeler for his best selling *Out of the Hurly Burly or Life in an Odd Corner*, in which he guides the villagers through the self-revelation of their multiple human weaknesses.

Like Clark (or Adeler) many of the rural humorists were journalists and wrote from their awareness of what people were interested in. Sometimes their success as humorists led to the dropping of newspaper connections, as did the best known of the group, Edgar W. Nye. Best known as Bill Nye, he was born in Maine, grew up in Wisconsin, and went to Wyoming Territory when he was twenty-five to edit the Laramie *Boomerang*. He read his funny sketches first to a local and then to increasingly distant audiences, printed these humorous skits in book after book, so that his total sales were well over five million. Sometimes, with those who maintained the journalistic connection, the humorist was known by his newspaper, as James Bailey, the "Danbury News Man," or Robert Burdette, the "Burlington Hawkeye Man," who delivered his famous sketch "The Rise and Fall of the Moustache" to five thousand audiences all over the country.

If the humorist did not establish solely for himself a *persona* through whom he made his observations on American life, he might establish one or more characters to whom, as successive adventures took place, readers could look with familiarity and expectation. Thus George Wilbur Peck created his mischievous monster, known as Peck's Bad Boy, who played one savage practical joke after another on his gullible papa. The cruelty of his character did not hurt his creator's own advancement, for Peck went on to become mayor of Milwaukee and then governor of the state. Charles B. Lewis remained only a Detroit *Free Press* reporter, but under the print shop pseudonym M. Quad he created the Bowsers, the long-suffering, patient, all-knowing wife, with her support of the impetuous, ex-

citable, hot-tempered, conceited Mr. Bowser, with his long series of domestic follies.

Through such *personae* or established characters the rural humorists surveyed the institutions and concerns of American people to show the disparity between what people thought some institution was supposed to perform and what actually took place, to point out folly of exaggerated concern with some part of life to the neglect of other equally important parts, to ridicule the silly sentimentality of the period. Beyond the eight humorists mentioned above, there are some twenty more of comparable reputation in their day. In addition there were some forty or fifty others of local fame or short-lived popularity whose names can only be recovered by exploring the magazines and papers of that time or examining the many multivolumed collections of American Wit and Humor that are found on every publisher's list in the last years of the century. These scores of less important humorists fail less in technique, for the tricks of the humorist's trade were easy to emulate, than in attitude. Critics will differ in the number and character of the best fifty or so rural humorists, but I wish to use as my standard for the selection of the top twenty that quality of detached critical intelligence that has always marked the world's great humorists. There is no Chaucer, no Rabelais, no Cervantes, and no Molière, Fielding, Goethe, or Byron in the American group, except for Mark Twain. But if these writers are not Mark Twains they are with him in their amused, tolerant, yet critical concern with the quality of American life.

In all areas and places in American society, whether high or low, rich or poor, college-trained or self-educated, city or country, there have always been enough citizens of native shrewdness, homely common sense, and realistic awareness to keep the country from being threatened by the excesses which the national freedom permits. Jefferson put his confidence for the nation's health in the farmer, diversified tradesmen, and the small property owner, even as he feared the city with its crowding mass, or *canaille* as he called it. Cooper in his sober indictment, *An American Democrat*, his unhumorous satire, *The Monikins*, his dramatic disaster, *Upside Down, or Philosophy in Petticoats* (the only time it was ever reprinted for popular consumption was in an American Humor an-

thology of 1894) gave warning of democratic dangers. So did foreign visitors as Alexis de Tocqueville, Mrs. Frances Trollope, Harriet Martineau, Count Gurowski, or Charles Dickens. Whether the farmers and small-town citizens were as self-disciplined and wise as Jefferson and others believed is hard to prove, but it is obvious that because they were isolated on farms or scattered in small groups they did not, because they could not physically do so whether tempted or not, react *en masse* to some demagogue, or religious fanatic, or bank scandal, or new invention, fad, disease, or cure.

Although Jefferson seems not to have had much of a sense of humor, that limitation had little to do with his confidence in the safety of a rural society. But a far more significant safety valve than he realized was a native humor that provided psychological protection for its participants (both joker and audience) from the desperate loneliness of frontier living, from the crop disasters or natural disasters, from the assorted dangers of epidemics, raids, feuds, and foreclosures. When humor was not present or could not be fostered in time to laugh fanaticism away, national disgraces did occur from the witchcraft trials in Salem of 1692 to the McCarthy trials of 1952. But all through the nineteenth century the countryside was thought to be and perhaps was the nursery of American virtues, the anchor in national storms, the beacon light of freedom and opportunity to the oppressed of the Old World. Although there seems to be a fair amount of wishful thinking in much of this patriotic picture, there was a period between the Civil War and the Spanish American War when one of the best preservers of national sanity was found in rural humor.

The critical intelligence that I find in these country humorists is best seen through a cumulation of examples, a demonstration impossible here. Yet the deduction such a list would reveal is the faculty or power the humorist has for seeing life as it is, his understanding of his own and his neighbor's relation to it, his ability to focus his consciousness on these social relationships with detachment and without rancor or prejudice or fear. These qualities are potentially in all citizens but exist in daily life (or are developed) among the balanced, healthy, level-headed, shrewd, and wise people who set the tone of the times without realizing it—and these

make up the humorist's audience. All humorists accept the idea of original sin, although few would accept its doctrinal and institutional exemplifications. As man, so society is subject to social sins none of which is original except in the peculiarities of their particular manifestations in time, place, and circumstance. The critical function which the rural humorists performed was to awaken that audience to the follies and sins of the time (and to be awakened to your folly is to be cured of it) by the healing gift of laughter.

Being serious about humor is one of the great follies of the academician, and I see that I have already apotheosized these forgotten humorists in a fashion to amuse them could they be aware of it. Charles Farrar Browne (Artemus Ward), something of a philosopher among American native humorists, once said of his fellows: ". . . they have always done the most toward helping virtue on its pilgrimage, and the truth has found more aid from them than from all the grave polemicists and solid writers that have ever spoken or written. . . . They have helped the truth along *without encumbering it with themselves*." In the underlining I follow Albert Jay Nock who quotes this passage, for it captures the final qualities of the rural humorists we have been discussing. As we move away from this tradition we move into the powerful personal writing of the private genius. I mean no discredit to Melville and Whitman, or James and Dickinson, or Howells and Lanier, or Crane and Norris, for of course no one would wish to be without the poems and novels they wrote in this period. But it is true that we study the works of these eight unique and special persons through the knowledge we have of the artists themselves. By contrast, the eight humorists mentioned earlier are as transparently anonymous as the audience they wrote for. In accepting the truth of Melville's *Clarel* and *Billy Budd*, we accept it with Melville's personal shaping, his distortions, emphases, passions. And so for the other artists, and more power to them.

But the humorists absent themselves to serve as mirrors of the assorted foibles of their day. I do not claim for them any conscious abnegation in deference to a higher than personal goal. They were craftsmen and craftswomen with undisguised money-making incentives, and this motive applies to all hundred or so I have exam-

ined, including the score I think most effective. The difference is that the twenty or so had the critical intelligence to perform for their generation the critical function I have noted above

Thus Thomas Bailey Aldrich in his *Story of a Bad Boy* writes a sweet tale and semiautobiography that many admired but few believed. And so G. W. Peck corrected the archness of Aldrich's characterization by presenting *Peck's Bad Boy*, who was as excessive in his badness as his counterpart was in virtue. Similarly Frances Hodgson Burnett's *Little Lord Fauntleroy* was so excessively refined, with name to match, that Henry Shute's *Real Boy*, Plupy, and his companions Beany and Pewt, were needed to restore the balance. Again the Wright brothers tinkered and dreamed and got their machine up for a few seconds to collapse with a crash, although they finally accomplished what hundreds of other tinkerers had tried and failed. So John Godfrey Saxe reminded his age of the continued applicability of the Greek myth in his comic poem "Icarus," and J. T. Trowbridge improved the tale, the verse, and the comic moral in his "Darius Green and His Flying Machine."

But it is futile to set up these parallels, for the list would be so long as to defeat its purpose. Indeed in going through Marshall Wilder's 1907 ten-volume collection, *The Wit and Humor of America*, I find almost every folly, danger, prepossession, freak, new departure, and disaster that threatened American sanity was met with a rejoinder by one of the rural humorists. The only disturbance in our social evolution that they failed to meet was the union crisis in the labor versus management battles that marked the period. Perhaps because of their own rural background, as well as that of their audiences, they were not able to grasp the issue, for I find no treatment in rural humor of the essential correctness of the union position on organization, child labor, workman's compensation, shorter hours, all matters that we now take for granted. But except for this important oversight, and a few less important ones, it is surprising how widespread was the humorists' net. I doubt that they were all successful in freeing the nation from its errors any more than Mark Twain could stop the Philippine take-over with "The War Prayer" and "To the Person Sitting in Darkness," but in all cases it reminded those who were worried about our growing imperialism of the errors of the time so that

they could more readily restore sanity when the fever of that particular act had subsided.

So much of what Mark Twain did was done also by Bill Nye and many other rural humorists. Why is it then that Clemens is remembered and Nye and the others forgotten? The question contains its own answer, for it is just because we have singled out Mark Twain (and justifiably so) to represent the dazzling best in native American humor that his less accomplished or less artistic contemporaries have faded to comparative shade. But there is more to the discrepancy in reputation than this, for indeed Clemens does assert his personality, his rage at injustice, his hatred of hypocrisy, his scorn of the gullible grubs who were asking to be gulled. Less personal in most of his work than any of the other eight novelists or poets mentioned above, he is also much more personal than any of the humorists mentioned, or indeed than any humorist in American letters of any period or classification.

A still further reason for the loss of readers for these humorists is the form of the humor itself and the manner of its publication. The very concern with contemporary life imposed a circumscribed set of subjects. Samantha's acid jabs at Josiah Allen's unreasoned insistence on male superiority was written in 1872, almost fifty years before the Nineteenth Amendment gave women the right to vote and a century before the equal rights laws of our time. Accordingly, one of the best sections in her first book is now of interest to historians, not citizens. Not only are the subjects that were most interesting to the humorist's initial audience of little interest to later generations, but they are also hurt by the nature of their publication. This impediment applies in fact to some of Mark Twain's work, although the volumes for which he is best known have escaped.

What I mean is that almost all of the humorists wrote sketches, essays, anecdotes, or what we sometimes call short short stories. Much of the original appeal of these humorists was that they wrote or spoke in short units for oral presentation or for a newspaper column. The great popularity of the sketches led to solid cover publication of collections of the small units, one item following another in rapid order. I happen to have four volumes of Bill Nye's before me, and I find in the *Red Book* he has seventy



selections in 389 pages, in *Guest at Ludlow* there are twenty-eight items in 262 pages, for *Bill Nye and Boomerang* there are 114 in 286 pages, and *Baled Hay*, with absurdly small print, 138 selections in the 320-page book. The average of four pages per essay or sketch is typical not only of Nye's work but of most of the others, which would make a full column in a newspaper or a page of a standard-sized magazine. But note that we would read the rest of the newspaper or magazine also, and perhaps another skit or two of a different humorist written in a different pattern, and be otherwise involved in many other activities before we picked up the next Nye humorous essay. James Redpath and Major Pond, who managed most of these humorists on their national speaking tours, found out very early that the best arrangement to guarantee enthusiastic audience response was to have a mixed program, so Mark Twain and George Washington Cable appeared together. Bill Nye's most successful tour was when he shared the stage with James Whitcomb Riley. All I am getting at here is that with all the humor, skill, and critical perception at Nye's command (and I use him as typical of the group), and with the most sympathetic and expectant audience any humorist could ask for, still it is almost impossible to read one of his books all the way through. One could read the first and the second with responsive chuckles, but the third would seem less funny, for the fourth one would have to concentrate to keep the mind from wandering, for the fifth one might falter but proceed, with occasional skimming, by the sixth one would know what was going to happen as soon as one determined the subject matter, by the seventh, if one got that far, the formula would be so patently obvious that one would put the book aside with a sigh of disappointment.

All art has pattern, design, formula, but as the oldest principle in aesthetics assures us it cannot be, must not be, obvious, *artis est celare artem*. Only two writers who relate to the rural humorists but are not of them seem to have escaped the general neglect of the group, Joel Chandler Harris and Mark Twain. The special quality of *Uncle Remus* has made Harris's work something of a children's classic, and thus in a quite different category from the humorists treated here. Mark Twain escaped this fatal impediment by writing longer sketches and stories, providing continuity between them (as

in *Roughing It*), but even so there is a notable failing of interest in some of the late volumes that are little more than collections of anecdotal sketches. The individual story is fine by itself, but when one reads a number of them *seriatim* the problem noted above appears even with our greatest humorist. But, of course, it is the Mark Twain of the novels that we remember best, in large measure because our interest grows with each page. But all the other rural humorists, by the very facility of their skill in exploiting the short sketch for humorous purposes, limited their audience to their own contemporaries.

If, then, these humorists had only such an audience, and if their writing is not of the lasting skill of Mark Twain, and if their subjects are dated beyond recall, are they worthy of attention at all? As America became more urban, educated, sophisticated, it is perfectly true that their reputations vanished. With the turn of the century, the farm, the country town, the simple trades were scorned rather than remembered fondly. With Edgar Lee Masters' *Spoon River Anthology*, Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio*, Sinclair Lewis's *Main Street*, H. L. Mencken's regular "American Credo" section in each month's *American Mercury*, the rural and village background of American life lost its champions. There were new humorists, to be sure, but they adjusted to new national needs and new media—to the comic strip and cartoons, to movie, radio, and television, to *Vanity Fair*, *Ballyhoo*, *College Humor*, *Esquire*, *New Yorker*, *Playboy*, and *Mad Comics*.

What then is the permanent contribution of these writers? Chiefly, and almost only, in their guarding and preserving of our national sanity. When we consider how fragile a civilization is, how especially fragile it is in a democracy where freedom permits the growth and expression of antidemocratic ideas and programs, we realize how necessary it is to encourage anything that will help the nation maintain its balance, flexibility, and inner control through the good will of its citizens. What works in the political sphere applies equally to the social and cultural spheres and to all other areas of our national existence. For some forty years the rural humorists served the nation well in alerting their audiences to the assorted follies, perversions, dangers about them. This service was not as seriously intended or as patriotically motivated as my state-

ment may indicate, for these writers wrote for money, not medals. But admitting so much does not detract from their service, it only makes them professionals. Their contribution, then, was more journalistic than literary. If we owe them any debt, it is one of gratitude for what they were able to do for their time, not for ours. But if we cannot read them with any great glee or zest, we can wish that we had their counterparts. In our own tortured time, when our democratic civilization seems even more shaky than it did a century ago, we could certainly use the same sort of treatment they gave theirs.